Exploring the Meaning of Freedom: Postemancipation Societies in Comparative Perspective

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The centennial of the final abolition of slavery in Cuba and Brazil has occasioned an exceptional burst of scholarly interest, perhaps in part owing to the moral weight that the questions of slavery and freedom continue to carry. Integrating a moral vision into scholarship on this subject, however, has remained problematic. The old notion of slave emancipation as a purifying, redemptive triumph of moral righteousness over self-interest has receded, sometimes to be replaced by a more jaundiced view of emancipation as the trading of one master for another, or the relinquishing of explicit coercion and explicit protection for implicit coercion and no protection at all. The best recent work on emancipation has challenged these polarities, emphasizing the complexity of former slaves’ initiatives in the context of the constraints placed on them.2

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1. Several conferences were held in 1986 to commemorate Cuban abolition. See the proceedings of meetings in Paris in the Anuario de Estudios Americanos, 43 (1986). Recent Cuban essays appear in Academia de Ciencias de Cuba, La esclavitud en Cuba (Havana, 1986); recent Spanish essays in Francisco de Solano, ed., Estudios sobre la abolición de la esclavitud (Madrid, 1986); and work in Catalan in a special number of L’avenç (Barcelona), 101 (Feb. 1987). See also the essay by Manuel Moreno Fraginals, “La esclavitud: A cien años del fin,” Revolución y Cultura (Havana), 8 (Aug. 1986), 2–11. Brazilian abolition will be discussed at conferences in 1988 at the University of Sào Paulo and the University of Campinas, among others; an interesting set of short essays has already appeared in the Folhetim of the Folha de Sào Paulo, May 8, 1987.

2. Willie Lee Rose, in a 1976 essay, responded to the swing toward a negative view of the achievements of Reconstruction and warned of the risk of “wrongly outflanking the significance of emancipation for the freedmen themselves,” of ignoring “their perceptions of the great event, their hopes and fears for the future.” See her *Jubilee and Beyond: What Was Freedom?* in *What Was Freedom’s Price?*, David G. Sansing, ed. (Jackson, MS, 1978), 5. For the development of an interactive perspective, see in particular Frederick Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters: Plantation Labor and Agriculture in Zanzibar and Coastal Kenya, 1890–1925* (New Haven, 1980); Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom*
As one attempts to formulate a research design for work on the aftermath of emancipation, the question arises: what exactly should one do with this insight about behavior, this realization that slave emancipation was neither a transcendent liberation nor a complete swindle, but rather an occasion for reshaping—within limits—social, economic, and political relationships? It is one thing to invoke the concept of multiple options and multiple constraints; it is quite another to show with any precision what processes and outcomes resulted from the interaction of initiative and context.

In this essay I will first discuss certain ways in which the articles that follow expand our understanding of emancipation and postemancipation society. My focus will be on questions that can be raised for a range of societies in the Americas, with particular attention to Brazil, Cuba, and the United States. I will then try to suggest several new directions in which inquiry might go, focusing on sources, methodology, and interpretation. In some instances, I will draw on work from the very different, but conceptually related, field of Latin American colonial history. Analyses of the transformation of indigenous societies in the aftermath of conquest can, on occasion, provide both practical and theoretical insights into the study of relations between former masters and former slaves.3

The larger purpose of the essay is to suggest ways of studying the meaning of freedom. A comparative approach to emancipation has certain obvious advantages for the highlighting of crucial differences and the testing of hypotheses. Perhaps less obvious is the value of comparison in raising new questions and reshaping old ones. For comparison can juxtapose not only selected “cases,” but also very different historiographies, each with a set of analytic presuppositions and accompanying questions. Out of the clash of those presuppositions and the careful application of some of the questions from one historical tradition to the evidence of another, new frameworks for analysis may emerge. Thus, for example, a

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3. Portions of this essay began as a reflection on the work of Charles Gibson, presented at the 1986 American Historical Association meeting under the title, “Stress and Resilience in Relations of Subordination: Extending the Logic of The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule.” In recasting the ideas of that essay, I have relinquished the explicit discussion of the ways in which an analysis of Aztecs can shape an interpretation of both methodology and theoretical questions to be asked, retaining only a few general references to the parallels that might be drawn between the study of colonial Indian communities and the study of postemancipation societies. My debt to Gibson’s work, however, remains undiminished. For references to other works in colonial history, see n. 38 below.
close examination of several societies after slavery can pose a challenge
to the conventional dichotomy of dependence versus autonomy for the
former slave. At the same time, such a comparison may encourage us to
expand our focus to encompass a wider range of social groupings, rather
than attempting to isolate the interactions of former masters and former
slaves.

Hebe Castro’s essay, “Beyond Masters and Slaves,” provides a précis
of her larger work on the community of Capivary in the province of Rio de
Janeiro during the nineteenth century. Her study is a model of the way in
which the systematic exploration of new sources in a local context can force
a reframing of central questions about the national experience.1 Three fea-
tures of this work might be highlighted. First, Castro’s study illuminates
the lives of poor rural Brazilians, not as individuals “marginal” to a domi-
nant society, but as participants in a lively economy complementary to
both urban society and the coffee-growing activities undertaken by more
prosperous residents of the region. Second, her portrait of Capivary adds
to the complexity of our image of Brazilian slavery. Like Stuart Schwartz,
Castro emphasizes the dispersed character of Brazilian slaveholding, and
the small size of the units on which many slaves resided, even in the
context of a highly concentrated pattern of formal landowning.2 Third,
her work implicitly rejects a unilinear concept of proletarianization as the
inevitable outcome of emancipation and the expansion of commercial agri-
culture. Whatever the aims of legislators and large-scale landowners, the
poor of Capivary were not fully denied access to land. By retaining such
access, they were able to escape transformation into a mere “rural work
force.”

Capivary, with its mixed population cultivating coffee for the internal
market and manioc for consumption and for sale to the city, provides more
than a simple community study. The presence of dispersed, small-scale,
partially slave-based subsistence and commercial agriculture—character-
istic not only of Capivary but of significant portions of the province of Rio
de Janeiro—raises a question of crucial importance for the understanding
of abolition.3 The question is: how does the precise class structure of a
given slaveholding society affect the transition to free labor, both in terms
of changing patterns of labor use and in terms of the development of pro-
and antiabolition movements? Coincidentally, the same question emerges

4. See Hebe Maria Mattos de Castro, Ao sul da história: Lacradores pobres na crise
do trabalho escravo (São Paulo, 1987).
5. See Stuart B. Schwartz, Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society:
Bahia, 1550–1835 (New York, 1985), especially chap. 16.
6. On the provincial dimensions of this phenomenon, see Castro, Ao sul da história, 30.
in Seymour Drescher’s analysis from the opposite perspective—from the vantage point of a transnational comparison of the course of abolition.

Drescher’s study, “Brazilian Abolition in Comparative Perspective,” explores the dramatic regional variations in the significance of slavery within Brazil that emerged after the termination of the transatlantic slave trade, and explores the consequences for the development of abolitionism and antiabolitionism. He draws parallels with similar regional disparities—North/South and East/West—in the United States and Cuba, and notes the political risks to slaveholders of such divergence. In both the United States and Brazil, there seems also to have been a concentration of slaveholding within regions in the decades before abolition, as large-scale rural owners came to hold an increasing fraction of all slaves and the proportion of farmers owning no slaves grew.7

The political outcomes in the United States and in Brazil, however, were very different. While planters in the U.S. South managed to forge a regional coalition to oppose abolition, planters in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo seem to have had only limited success in mobilizing opposition to the steps that were taken toward gradual emancipation in the 1870s and 1880s. Drescher comments on Brazil: “The historian of North Atlantic abolitions is . . . struck by the absence of a united front of the major slaveholding provinces against the gradual termination of the institution.”

There are many possible explanations for this contrast. Regional and intraregional variations in the degree of commitment to slavery itself constitute the factor most often cited. The slaveholders of different producing zones within Brazil varied radically in the markets they faced and the labor supply they could draw on and thus in their visions of the risks and benefits of abolition.8 One might still wonder at the failure to organize widespread resistance to abolition in key regions of Rio and São Paulo, where the institution of slavery remained strong. The point here is not to imply that planters acquiesced early on to abolition; they did not. The question is why they did not choose to mount a broad-ranging offensive against the erosion of one basis of their livelihood. Drescher cites elite

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7. Some of this concentration resulted from a relative decline of slavery in the cities. On cities in the U.S. South, see the references in Drescher’s essay and Fields, Slavery and Freedom, chap. 3. Concentration can also be identified within rural areas. Gavin Wright, The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century (New York, 1978), 34–36, points out the increase in the percentage of farm operations in the U.S. South with no slaves. For Capivary, in the period 1850–88, Castro has documented the predominance of sales of slaves from owners of small properties to owners of large properties. See Castro, Ao sul da história, 38–55.

fear of the consequences of mobilization among a racially heterogeneous free population. Others have pointed to the ideological ambivalence and defensiveness of Brazilian planters in the face of a growing European and North American ideology of free labor.9

One should perhaps recall that the unity created by slaveholders in the southern United States was itself both incomplete and precarious, resting on regional identity, political concessions, ideological maneuvers, and a longstanding tradition of racism at all social levels. The costs of a cross-class white “racial” coalition were high, and its survival during wartime was uncertain.10 The feat was perhaps hardly likely to be replicated in the very different environment of Brazil decades later.

Castro’s work suggests that one should also seek a partial answer in the dynamics of relationships at the local level. From her analysis, it appears that free small-scale cultivators were often the “clients” of large landowners, but were not entirely the creatures of the elite. If we compare them to the small farmers of the southern United States, we find that they were bound to larger planters by ties of debt and credit, and perhaps by a need for protection, but not necessarily by a shared “racial” identity, and certainly not by a democratic electoral practice. The implications of this pattern for the dependence or autonomy of such individuals are ambiguous. As victims of the “clientelism” for which Brazil remains famous, the poor of Capivary acted at times to support the political power of specific patrons, and had virtually none of the political rights of their counterparts in the white population of the U.S. South. But it was the self-consciously “independent” poor southerners, not the “dependent” Brazilians, who were persuaded to join forces in a war to defend slave society. The interplay of shared and conflicting interests, culture, and ideology that brought about this contrast remains to be explored comparatively.

Drescher poses the intriguing question: “Was the relationship between

9. See, most recently, David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York, 1984), 298, as well as the voluminous literature on Brazilian abolitionism.

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?" The question, however, could quickly become even more complex. What were the implications for cross-racial social relations of a pattern of slaveholding in Brazil so widespread that people who were indisputably poor —whether white, black, or mulatto—often owned a slave or two? While frequent manumission might provide the basis for a multiracial "plebeian subculture," selective but extensive slaveownership among the poor could also create tensions that would divide free and slave. More detailed comparison would seem to be necessary here. Further systematic analyses of specific regions should enable us to move beyond the stereotypes of a politically "democratic" but racially exclusionary South and an oligarchic Brazilian society with a large racially integrated marginal population.

Answers to these questions, as they emerge, will have important implications not only for the classic question of the causes of abolition, but also for the evolution of postemancipation society. Each region’s social structure on the eve of abolition shaped the balance of forces with which former slaves would have to contend. Patterns of debt, credit, marketing, access to land, and social relations formed the backdrop to the transformations wrought by the ending of slavery, and the existing free rural population was generally the milieu into which former slaves would at least initially move.

Drescher emphasizes the evaporation of the Brazilian abolitionist movement after the ending of slavery and the lack of organized programs to aid the freed people. But equally significant, surely, is the relative absence of the violence and vengeance so characteristic of white southerners’ responses, not only to emancipation but to the mere mention of "social equality." To what extent does the lack of white violence directed at former slaves in Brazil reflect an acceptance of social change, and to what extent does it instead reflect the containment of such change through other mechanisms?  

11. See the penetrating discussion of social relations in Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, *Negros, estrangeiros: Os escravos libertos e sua volta à África* (São Paulo, 1985). I am grateful to Judith Lee Allen, who is currently conducting research on the free population of the Bahian Recôncavo, for her discussion of "plebeian subculture" in this context. See also Allen, "Tailors, Soldiers, and Slaves: The Social Anatomy of a Conspiracy" (M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1987).

12. This observation is not meant to downplay the significance of violence and repression in Brazilian society, but merely to emphasize that such repression was rarely framed in terms of the maintenance of a "racial" order. Emilia Viotti da Costa and others have argued that the strength of class rule and clientelism in Brazil blunted the need for an explicitly "racial" ideology and practice of domination. See da Costa, *The Brazilian Empire: Myths and Histories* (Chicago, 1985), esp. chap. 9.
Though the image of oligarchic continuity can be overdrawn, it seems clear that in some regions, such as the Northeast, the incorporation of former slaves into existing patron-client relations diminished the probability of direct confrontation. Peter Eisenberg, for example, has argued that former slaves working on the sugar plantations of Pernambuco continued in a position of dependency. They moved into established roles in the agricultural economy, becoming part of a longstanding free, but impoverished, work force. But what of areas such as São Paulo, where former slaves were not smoothly incorporated into the evolving pattern of agricultural production?

Reid Andrews, in “Black and White Workers: São Paulo, Brazil, 1888–1928,” cautiously uses the category of “marginality,” rejected by Castro, to describe the role of Afro-Brazilians within the growing rural and urban economy. One strength of his analysis is that his use of the concept is time dependent, contextual, and specific. He disputes Florestan Fernandes’s emphasis on the importance of a slave “heritage” in handicapping Afro-Brazilians in the postemancipation labor market, focusing instead on the specific choices and bargains that former slaves attempted to make, and on the context in which they had to negotiate.

In Andrews’s view, it was planters, in alliance with the state, who took the initiative in excluding Afro-Brazilians by flooding the São Paulo labor market with subsidized immigrants once abolition was underway. But at the same time, the values on which libertos insisted put them repeatedly at a disadvantage in competition with immigrant laborers. Libertos’ desire to be treated with respect, to escape the direct coercion of plantation overseers, and to construct a new family division of labor conflicted with planters’ preferences. Employers generally sought subjugated laborers who were prepared to put all members of the family to work in the fields or factory. The image of the “marginal” Afro-Brazilian thus ceases to be one of an incapable worker and becomes one of an individual unwilling to submit to unreasonable exigencies for inadequate pay, particularly in the face of employers who explicitly disparaged his or her capacities.

Instead of attributing fixed patterns of behavior to immigrants and

13. Peter L. Eisenberg also sees a general decline in the standard of living for rural workers. See Eisenberg, The Sugar Industry in Pernambuco: Modernization Without Change, 1840–1910 (Berkeley, 1974), esp. chap. 8. Jaime Reis, by contrast, points out the pitfalls of constructing a pessimistic portrait of the fate of sugar workers in the postslavery world. He points out that the descendants of slaveholders on whose memoirs such a portrait partially relies may have shaped their evidence to defend the conduct of an old elite against the depredations of a new one. See Reis, “From Banguê to Usina: Social Aspects of Growth and Modernization in the Sugar Industry of Pernambuco (1850–1920),” in Land and Labour in Latin America: Essays on the Development of Agrarian Capitalism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, Kenneth Duncan and Ian Rutledge, eds. (Cambridge, 1977), 369–396.
libertos, Andrews shows how the demands and bargains of each group evolved. As the immigrants gained a footing, they too balked at low wages and direct control. When factory jobs opened up for Afro-Brazilians with the ending of subsidized European immigration, the composition of the labor force changed, and elite portraits of the descendants of slaves altered swiftly to revalue the "national worker." One might draw a parallel here to Walter Rodney's analysis of the Guyanese working population, in which he contrasts the experiences and behavior of Afro-Guyanese Creoles and East Indian immigrants, but carefully avoids the classic stereotype of "submissive" indentured immigrant workers.  

One could perhaps take this analysis a step further and emphasize the highly relational character of contemporary portraits of different groups of workers. In São Paulo, former slaves were juxtaposed with Italian immigrants, and planters characterized the former slaves as excessively demanding and sensitive to violations of their dignity. In Bahia, on the other hand, observers in the early twentieth century contrasted the moradores resident on plantations, often descendants of slaves, to the catingueiros who came in seasonally from the back country to work on the sugar estates. The stereotypes and attributed attitudes were suddenly reversed: the morador was portrayed as a good and reliable worker, the catingueiro as strong but haughty and proud.

Obviously, substantive differences between Bahia and São Paulo shaped the behavior of former slaves in each area after emancipation. But the variability of the stereotypes invoked should alert one to the need for extensive direct evidence of actual beliefs and behaviors against which to measure attributed "attitudes." Scholars have become sensitive to the malleability of elite views concerning the aptitudes of different ethnic groups for different kinds of work. As Andrews points out, these tended to shift with changing labor markets, and cannot be taken as descriptions of reality. But equal caution may be called for in using indirect


15. See the observation by S. Fróes Abreu in Alguns aspectos da Bahia (Rio de Janeiro, 1926), 72. He writes that the catingueiro is not a bad worker, but notes, "Tem, entretanto, grandes defeitos; é altivo demais e não se sujeita muito à condição de servilidade, como o negro."

16. Fields is a forceful proponent of the view that both "race" and racism are variable and contextual, and that elite descriptions of the capacities and incapacities of Afro-Americans were not only descriptively inaccurate, but also should not be seen as reified "racist attitudes" capable on their own of determining behavior. Instead, such descriptions shifted with changing social and economic circumstances, and were part of the larger "ideology of race." See, for example, Fields, "Race and Ideology in American History," in Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward, J. Morgan Kousser and James McPherson, eds. (New York, 1982), 143–177. See also Lawrence N. Powell, New
evidence of the attitudes of the former slaves themselves. Contemporary accounts of prideful former slaves may seem less obviously biased than accounts of lazy ones, but in both cases the descriptive terms should themselves be subject to critical scrutiny.

Robert Levine's essay, "'Mud-Hut Jerusalem': Canudos Revisited," also addresses the question of the goals of rural Brazilians, but from a very different angle. While Castro traces the structure of rural society and Andrews analyzes the evolution of the labor market, Levine examines a specific social movement that cut across the line dividing former slaves and long-free rural folk. Perhaps most intriguing in Levine's portrait of the followers of Antônio Conselheiro is his emphasis on their common vision of self-sufficiency, a desire to achieve a degree of insulation from the demands of large landholders and government authorities. While discussing the conjunctural political factors that shaped elite responses to Canudos at both the national and the state levels, Levine also discerns an economic and social vision within the religious vision of the community. The goal of self-sufficiency expressed by the followers of Conselheiro, though a frequent feature of religious secessionist movements, could also constitute a significant challenge to the economic power of dominant groups, if it were realized on a large scale.

One might draw a parallel with the exodus of Afro-American families to Kansas from the rural South in the late 1870s. There, too, religious figures and a degree of apparent unrealism marked the sudden mobilization of population. At least some of the participants in each of the two movements shared a millenarian vision, but one resting on a concrete experience of the intolerable hardship of existing conditions in the countryside, heightened in the Brazilian Northeast by drought and in the southern United States by systematic white violence. In both instances, the protagonists shared a dream of access to land and of mutual responsibility for sufficiency. In both northeastern Brazil and the southern United States, landholders were frustrated by the real or potential loss of labor, and by the threatened disruption of labor and social relations. Government responses to the two movements differed sharply, with authorities opting for state-directed repression in Brazil, and national neglect, combined with a degree of local repression, in the United States. While the followers of Conselheiro were virtually exterminated, some of the Kansas migrants became relatively successful. But neither movement became a sustained solution, and for most of the rural poor the dream of self-sufficiency had to be postponed or redirected.17

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Masters: Northern Planters During the Civil War and Reconstruction (New Haven, 1980), esp. chap. 6.

17. A classic account of the "Kansas fever" and its antecedents is Nell Irvin Painter,
In a sense, these studies can be seen as contributing a partial answer to the question: how did former slaves give meaning to their freedom? What did they seek when they had achieved a modicum of economic power, or even just the capacity to move freely? What were the consequences of this striving, given the constraints imposed by direct coercion, by limited employment opportunities, by immigration, and so forth? By examining Capivary, São Paulo, and Canudos the authors have challenged any uniform portrait of postemancipation societies, while suggesting multiple ways to explore the initiatives of former slaves. With these examples in mind, we might consider two additional strategies for exploring the reshaping of society after slavery.

The first involves the notion of mapping as a way of capturing the consequences of the physical mobility that accompanied the end of slavery. A model here might be the work of Charles Gibson on the Valley of Mexico, in which by mapping encomiendas, cabeceras, sujetos, and parishes he discerned the degree of overlap between Spanish and indigenous systems of administration, and the differential significance of that overlap in the realms of church activity, private holdings, and governmental authority. In the case of postslavery societies, one needs to choose a geographical unit small enough to be explored in detail, but large enough to encompass a degree of movement by former slaves. One can then undertake a mapping of settlements, churches, and places of employment as a means of identifying patterns of continuity and transformation across the period of transition.

To begin with, one might ask whether former slave plantations remained nuclei of population, or whether individuals and families dispersed beyond their boundaries. It may make a significant difference to family autonomy, for example, whether a worker’s spouse and children continued to live in barracks on the estate, or the worker simply came to the plantation week by week from a nearby town or settlement. At an even smaller scale, moving to dispersed cabins throughout the property, as opposed to remaining in the old quarters, could influence not only a family’s relationship with the employer, but also its relations with other families and the

Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction (New York, 1977). In chaps. 9 and 10 Painter analyzes the role of the figure of Benjamin “Pap” Singleton and his vision of a God-given mission to lead Afro-Americans to Kansas. On Conselheiro, see, in addition to Levine’s essay in this volume, Ralph della Cava’s very suggestive account, “Brazilian Messianism and National Institutions: A Reappraisal of Canudos and Joaseiro,” HAHR, 48:3 (Aug. 1968), 402–420. Della Cava sees a degree of cooperation between Conselheiro and local landowners in the early phase of the movement.

possibilities for collective action. Conversely, there may be cases where the nuclei of former estates remained population centers even when the estate itself had broken up or gone bankrupt—and such continuity might have significant implications for the development of community institutions such as churches and mutual-aid societies.

If new clusters of population did emerge, where were they located? Did former slaves, for example, tend to migrate toward areas with access to local markets, as the recent work of Thomas Holt suggests for Jamaica? In those areas where slaveholding was more widespread than in the classic plantation pattern, what became of those who had previously resided on small slaveholdings? Does the dispersed slaveholding pattern identified by Schwartz and Castro translate into a dispersed population pattern for former slaves after slavery; and, if so, what were the implications for collective action? Geographical mobility was one component of freedom, and we need to examine how it was used and how it was constrained. Potentially, this “physical” measure can tell us a significant amount about the experiences of former slaves, the options they faced, and the social relations in which they participated.

One function of such mapping would be to help determine the incidence and shape of patterns of postemancipation experiences whose diversity is already apparent from other sources. It is clear that freedom could have a different meaning for an urban artisan and a rural field laborer, for an elderly African and a young creole, for a mother of three and an adolescent male, and so forth. By tracing the consequences on the ground of identifiable trends such as the extensive migration eastward in Cuba after slavery, the shift away from the estates in Jamaica, the increase in seasonal migration in Louisiana, and the shift toward cities and the frontier in Brazil, we can begin to suggest the options and priorities of different groups of former slaves.

A second component of freedom was a new form of legal personhood.


20. Thomas C. Holt has uncovered a tendency on the part of former slaves to gravitate toward regions that were at a distance from, but not entirely isolated from, plantations, and that provided reasonable access to local population centers. See Holt, The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1932 (forthcoming).
for those who had been slaves, and thus a new set of relations to other legal persons and to the legal process. This implies at least the possibility of a second research strategy: the close examination of postemancipation legal records. Overt violence, intimidation, poverty, and illiteracy could, in practice, drastically constrain access to legal processes, but legal records still remain a crucial source. Land disputes and other civil and criminal cases provide evidence of the continuing injustices to which former slaves were subject, but they are also a means for identifying some of the forms of striving those former slaves displayed, as well as helping to show how they conceived of themselves and their status. Of necessity, such records place a disproportionate emphasis on overt conflict, but interesting patterns may emerge in the frequency, the content, and even the language of disputes. These, in turn, may reveal shifts in the locus and terms of significant conflict, even if the records themselves tend to mislead us about the basic frequency of conflict. At the same time, one can indirectly trace the effects of changes in laws regarding access to land, the control of crops, and the ability to shift employment.

The records of the Freedmen’s Bureau in the United States, the Stipendiary Magistrates in the British West Indies, and the Juntas de Patronato in Cuba all provide raw material for understanding the goals of slaves, “apprentices,” and masters during the transition to free labor, and scholars have begun to explore the strategies and values reflected in them. As one moves away from the period of slavery, however, the task of exploring legal sources becomes very difficult, for there are no longer centralized records that juxtapose two sets of protagonists, former slaves and former masters, in the presence of an intervening or mediating state. The records of the Cuban Juntas end with final abolition; those of the Freedmen’s Bureau end a few years after emancipation. Once they are gone, disputes are dealt with elsewhere. We must turn to the huge body of criminal records, civil records, and land records, involving citizens who may or may not be identified as former slaves.21

21. The records of the Brazilian emancipation boards are less rich than those of the Cuban Juntas de Patronato, but their proceedings may nonetheless yield qualitative evidence on social relations, in addition to the quantitative evidence that has already been extracted from them for the study of abolition itself. Like the Juntas, however, their role in supervising the new labor system was much reduced compared to that of the Freedmen’s Bureau in the United States.

In those instances where a branch of the state continued to be identified as a potential ally of former slaves, correspondence that was directed to specific government agencies can be revealing. (Scholars of the U.S. South, for example, have located letters describing contemporary conditions in the files of the Department of Justice for the 1870s and 1880s. See Painter, Exodusters, esp. chaps. 2 and 3.) For somewhat different reasons, the relatários of Brazilian state governors and the ministers of agriculture on occasion contain detailed evidence on trends and incidents.
Few scholars of postemancipation society have tried to deal with this mass of disparate sources. Land disputes, for example, quickly draw one into a web of detail and dissimulation. Yet they may provide the best access we will find into the actual patterns of ownership, tenancy, and squatting. Castro’s work, which rests heavily on notarial archives, demonstrates the usefulness of these sources in outlining patterns of landholding, slaveholding, property transfer, and lending. Where notarial archives or their equivalent are available, it should be possible to explore patterns of land sale and acquisition; where these can be complemented by land registers and inventories, the possibilities expand still further. Indeed, Castro’s work demonstrates the importance of using the two kinds of evidence together, since land registers may present a misleading picture of landholding based on formal claims of ownership, thus concealing a more complex pattern of smallholding and squatting.

The inquiry should go beyond the search for individual “responses” to freedom, and look for group behaviors as well, exploring what kinds of collective action emerged, and under what circumstances such action crossed perceived racial lines. Louisiana provides a particularly significant area for study because of the experiences of unionization in the cane fields and the short-lived cross-racial populist coalitions. But even in areas where unionization was blocked, as in colonial Cuba, conflict continued in other domains. Records of the expulsion of squatters are particularly revealing, as are disputes over the forms of payment and the terms of work.

Other legal records offer similar possibilities. Recent scholarship, for


example, has raised questions about our commonsense interpretation of debt as an index of dependence. Through examining wills and inventories, we can explore the lines of debt and credit that were found in regions whose economy had previously rested on slavery, and ask whether debt was or was not a significant mechanism for the constraint of agricultural labor in this context. Castro’s work on Capivery calls attention to the function of debt as a mechanism not simply of labor coercion but of establishment of lines of clientage. The picture in some cases may turn out to be an even more complex one, since sharecropping and share wage systems rest not simply on the extension of credit to the worker by the landowner for supplies, but also on the implicit extension of credit by the worker to the landowner in the form of deferred wages.

Scholars have long recognized the utility of private plantation records, and studies of individual estates have portrayed the evolution of the employment of slaves and former slaves over time. But we still need middle-range studies that examine work patterns over a rural area larger than a single estate. With those in hand, we could begin to trace the network of connections between large plantations, small commercial farms, and subsistence agriculture. Where plantation employment records survive (as they do, for example, for the U.S. South and Cuba), they can be used to trace the range of job opportunities, the level and form of payment of wages, and the seasonal pattern of work. If used in conjunction with land


26. This is, of course, true of any system in which wages are deferred. A detailed discussion of forms of payment of wages in the U.S. South after slavery may be found in Jaynes, Branches Without Roots.


28. Schwartz, in Sugar Plantations, undertakes such an analysis, but for an earlier period. The significance of linkages between the peasant and plantation sectors has long been acknowledged by scholars of Caribbean peasantry. See, for example, Richard Frucht’s important article, “‘A Caribbean Social Type: Neither Peasant nor Proletarian.’” Social and Economic Studies, 16 (Sept. 1967), 295–300 and the work of Sidney W. Mintz, especially Caribbean Transformations (Chicago, 1974).

29. Employment records of several Louisiana plantations, for example, may be found in various repositories and in the papers of the Freedmen’s Bureau. See, among others, the Henry Clay Warmoth Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina; the Lemm Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Tulane University Library; and the plantation inspection reports from various parishes of Louisiana in papers of the Louisiana Assistant Commissioner, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, RG 105, United States National Archives. Records for a few Cuban plantations after emancipation can be found in the Archivo Nacional de Cuba, the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí, and the Archivo Provincial de Sancti Spiritus. See, for example, the records of the ingenios San
records, they may yield a picture of the back-and-forth between work on small plots and employment in large-scale agriculture that we know in a general way to have been characteristic of many areas after slavery.

The challenge is to find ways to read and order these records once we no longer have the category of "slave" as an organizing principle. The fact that the members of the category of "former slave" are often much harder to identify poses not only an enormous practical problem but also an important interpretive one: to what extent can we reasonably expect to analyze the situation of former slaves without continual reference to former free persons of color, poor native whites, and immigrants? Indeed, the entire concept of postemancipation society necessarily expands beyond the counterpoint of former master and former slave to a world of employers and employees, patrons and clients, planters and smallholders, in which these cross-cutting pairs do not strictly correspond to the older division of master and slave.

In northeastern Brazil, for example, from the point of view of the written records, former slaves nearly vanish into a large free poor rural population. To cope with this, we have to develop not only new research strategies, but also new definitions of the questions. We need to ask, for example, whether this blurring of categories in the records corresponds to an actual reduction of barriers to alliances across lines that previously seemed rigid, or whether distinctions that disappear from the written records remained firm in the minds of those who had always been free and those who had once been slaves. Levine's analysis of the Canudos experiment in this respect, since former slaves can be identified as participants but seem to have been closely allied with those who had never been enslaved. Similar alliances may be discerned among the rebels of eastern Cuba in the last years of Spanish rule.

These suggested strategies, all contingent on intense archival research into conditions in relatively limited geographical areas, may seem at once too ambitious and too modest to accomplish our goal of understanding the character of postemancipation societies. They are ambitious in that they require great feats of record linkage and detailed mapping; they are modest in that they focus on the discernible facts of employment, mobility, and legal proceedings. But it may be useful to recognize that even if the ultimate goal is to capture the "meaning of freedom," the initial questions we pose need not, perhaps, deal directly with the elusive

Fernando and Natividad, leg. 24, Fondo Valle-Iznaga. Archivo Provincial de Sancti Spíritus. Relatively few Brazilian plantation records appear to be available in public repositories, though there are important documents from state-subsidized central sugar mills in file IA5, 1–4, Arquivo Nacional do Brasil, Rio de Janeiro.
phenomenology of freedom. We can commence with recorded behavior and hope to move toward lived experience, in part through the addition of records of religious activity, musical expression, and other aspects of popular culture.\footnote{By way of parallel, The Aztecs under Spanish Rule, for all of its innovations of method and interpretation, is organized along quite conventional lines, with chapters titled "Tribes," "Towns," "Encomienda and Corregimiento," "Labor," "Land," and so forth. Gibson was exploring what we might now describe as different forms of collapse and resilience on the part of Indian communities under the stress of Spanish rule, but he approached those questions in a very matter-of-fact way.}

As we try to understand the relative degrees of dependence and autonomy, mobility and immobility, cultural expression and cultural repression, among former slaves, we may have to set about our work in a somewhat literal-minded way. For example, we can explore the presence or absence of sharecropping contracts, which can reveal specific strategies adopted by both parties and may be relatively easy to identify from legal records.\footnote{Clearly, if many such contracts in a given region were oral it will be more difficult to obtain a representative sample. But some trace even of oral contracts probably remains in legal records, either as the result of disputes, or in the lists of debts and property in wills and inventories, or possibly in tax registers. In cases where such arrangements were entirely customary, without even the formality of an oral contract, we may be forced to rely on memoirs, observers' reports, and ancillary testimony in criminal and civil cases.} Harold Woodman's work on the U.S. South has demonstrated how much agricultural history can be extracted from a close examination of contract law; in Cuba, Brazil, and the United States, contracts and discussions of contract law have survived and can be explored comparatively.\footnote{See Harold Woodman, "Post-Civil War Agriculture and the Law," Agricultural History, 53:1 (Jan. 1979), 319–337. Extensive discussions of Cuban agricultural contracts appear in the depositions filed with the Spanish Treaty Claims Commission in the U.S. National Archives. For the sugar regions of Brazil, the Arquivo Nacional contains records of contracts made with the short-lived engenhos centrais. Throughout Hispanic America, of course, evidence of various kinds of contracts appears in notarial archives and in wills and inventories. For the United States, there are contracts in the Freedmen's Bureau papers, as well as the materials that may survive in ordinary court records.} Establishing the character of contracts for service and for land, and examining their enforcement or nonenforcement, can be a first step toward understanding patterns of dependency and the limits of autonomy.

At the same time, such inquiries will require new interpretive strategies if we are to make the shift from the tangible evidence of contracts to the intangible inference of subordination or resistance. We can explore the degree of physical mobility and the transformed legal status of former slaves, and we may look to their behavior in these respects to tell us about their dependency or autonomy. But detailed investigation may also lead us to rethink what we mean by dependency and autonomy, and, in some cases, perhaps, to abandon the dichotomous formulation altogether. In-
Indeed, the category of “autonomy” itself is culturally variable and may at times be an anachronistic imposition.33

First, it is already clear that former slaves often placed goals of family and community above the assertion of simple individual autonomy. An entire literature on emancipation in the United States has emphasized the importance to former slaves of reconstituting families and pursuing collective aims.34 Moreover, family welfare and individual well-being were frequently intertwined, making the concept of individual autonomy misleading. While the notion of autonomy might at least initially apply, for example, to single males engaged in seasonal migration in search of work, it is somewhat less useful in evaluating the situation of a widow with several children attempting to remain on plantation land in the face of new demands for the payment of rent.35

Second, in looking at former slaves, we need to explore the ways in which protection was sought, along with autonomy. In some cases, the establishment and modification of reciprocal ties may have been as significant as the achievement of a degree of independence. In others, the struggle for a collective political voice was a prerequisite for individual physical security. The point here is not to downplay individual struggles for autonomy, but to examine the existing patterns of clientelism and the strategies former slaves developed for dealing with what was often a very narrow range of choices.

On these questions, northeastern Brazil offers several challenges: it is seemingly the locus classicus of continued dependency on the part of former slaves. But by asserting a simple continuity of domination, scholars may have inadvertently avoided the exploration of what actually went into

33: Orlando Patterson has made this argument in a different context in *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA, 1982).


35: An explicit attention to the role of age and gender within family strategies should also be incorporated into such analyses. We need to ask how the socially constructed roles of men and women were transformed during and after emancipation, and to analyze the links between these transformations and the parallel struggles over forms of labor. Most discussions of the “withdrawal” of women’s labor tend to blur the question of choice and decision, leaving it unclear just who initiated the reallocation of work time, at what point, and in what directions. For some initial suggestions on the labor of former slave women in the U.S., see Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*. For a brief discussion of women in the rural labor force in Cuba, with particular attention to their participation in harvest labor, see Scott, *Slave Emancipation*, 242–243.
patron-client relations.\textsuperscript{36} Within Brazilian historiography, the emphasis on oligarchical control has been a logical reaction against romanticized claims of paternalism. Nonetheless, we still need to explore what kinds of reciprocal or pseudoreciprocal relations were established, and with whom. What did former slaves give up when they entered into such relations, and what, if anything, did they gain? Was there a degree of choice among patrons; if so, how was it manipulated? Only in this way can we begin to delineate the actual meaning of domination, and explore the ways in which options were shaped and limited by established patterns of social relations.\textsuperscript{37}

Perhaps the most striking feature of scholarship on slavery in the last decades is the way in which it has broken the association of subordination with stasis and passivity. (In this, it parallels recent work on early colonial society, in which indigenous resistance and adaptations are highlighted within a framework of colonial domination.\textsuperscript{38}) Scholars have found numerous ways to examine slave initiatives without denying oppression, to explore the creation of oppositional belief systems in the context of attempted ideological domination, to delineate the slave community while acknowledging the continual efforts at repression of many of its essential features. In postemancipation studies we are seeing a similar development, as monolithic portraits of peonage or marginalization are superseded by accounts that emphasize negotiation, initiative, and choice, though in a situation of extreme constraint and, often, violence. By way of conclusion, we might identify three features of this evolving reevaluation.


\textsuperscript{37} Allen Johnson writes, in a review of Shepard Forman's work on rural Brazil, "A landlord's political power rests to a considerable degree on the loyalty of his dependent workers, and Forman is wrong in not seeing this 'personalism' as a form of influence on the peasant's part (however much we might despise the form)." (See Johnson, "Essays and Polemics: Latin American Society from Diverse Perspectives. A Review Article," \textit{Comparative Studies in Society and History}, 22:3 [July 1980], 478–484.) It is not yet clear, however, to what extent such "influence" can be attributed to poverty-stricken rural wage earners of the Northeast in the late nineteenth century, where suffrage was highly limited and economic options were few.

\textsuperscript{38} This reevaluation within colonial history might be seen as beginning with Gibson and developing through the work of many subsequent scholars, including Nancy Farris, Karen Spalding, Steve Stern, and William Taylor, among others. See Nancy M. Farris, \textit{Maya Society Under Colonial Rule: The Collective Enterprise of Survival} (Princeton, 1984); Karen Spalding, \textit{Huarochari: An Andean Society Under Inca and Spanish Rule} (Stanford, 1984); Steve J. Stern, \textit{Peru's Indian Peoples and the Challenge of Spanish Conquest: Huamanga to 1640} (Madison, 1982); and William B. Taylor, \textit{Drinking, Homicide and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages} (Stanford, 1979). Indeed, such a perspective could be said to characterize a large portion of contemporary scholarship on the social history of subordinate groups in a wide range of contexts.
The first is an emphasis on change over time. There was often a period of uncertainty immediately after the end of slavery in which various methods of labor control were tried, and relationships were tested, before a uniform pattern of subordination was reestablished. Examing how that uncertainty was resolved provides a clue to the aims of each group, to the important relations of power involved, and to the various constraints—such as the lack of capital, or the pressure of population growth—that ultimately made themselves felt. Andrews’s work on employment patterns provides an example of a new interpretation that rests on a close attention to change over time. He emphasizes the rapidity of the initial adjustment in São Paulo, but also argues that it was subject to renegotiation once conditions altered. Similarly, Levine’s analysis of Canudos takes as its context not simply the continuing poverty of northeastern Brazil, but a specific period of drought and economic depression that triggered the search for new solutions. In these and other cases, we are moving toward a more complex picture of the interlinked shifts in economic opportunities, levels of violence, and rationales of domination.

The second emphasis is on particular geographical and environmental patterns. At one level, this is so obvious that it goes without saying. Any good historical analysis pays attention to place. But in the case of slave emancipation, there is a particular significance to changes in the physical location and environment of residence and employment, precisely because of the constraints that slavery had placed on physical movement. The enforced isolation of slaves on estates was often a key component of social control. Attempts to maintain that isolation, and attempts to break it, thus became elements in the struggle over the meaning of freedom. Change could take the form of permanent relocation, daily travel, or seasonal migration. In each case, these forms of movement shifted the patterns of communication and experience, while expanding the awareness of options.

Charles Gibson wrote of colonial villages in the Valley of Mexico:

The patterns of subordination, however uniform in their abstract characteristics, were locally bounded. Cabecera jurisdictions, encomiendas, and haciendas were discrete manifestations of localism effectively preventing a consolidation of Indian interests. All native conduct was so confined. No two towns were ever capable of unit-

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39. The work of Fields emphasizes this initial uncertainty, particularly over the meaning of “free labor” and the character of each party’s obligations to the other. Jaynes traces the wide range of labor forms attempted in the first years after abolition, before family-based sharecropping emerged as the dominant form in the cotton South. See Fields, Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground and Jaynes, Branches Without Roots.
ing in organized resistance. The common qualities of Indian towns were insufficient bases for concerted action.\textsuperscript{40}

It is difficult to say whether the subordination of slavery was similarly felt as something which took place on an individual estate, or in an individual household, thus dampening the possibilities for concerted action. There is evidence both of isolation and of alliances in spite of isolation. But one can ask to what extent juridical freedom, and the physical mobility that accompanied it, helped to make broader alliances possible. In Cuba, former slaves joined in a socially radical, cross-class, anticolonial insurrection just nine years after abolition. The vitality of that movement, with its deep roots in the racially mixed population of eastern Cuba, suggests that in at least some cases juridical freedom, however constrained, did open the way for broader communication, alliance, and struggle. The mixed character of the Canudos experiment, though it ended in destruction, might suggest the same.

Third, there has been an increasing effort to distinguish the relative importance of different components of subordination, and, in turn, of different elements of freedom. Slavery obviously involved multiple constraints on human freedom, some of which were lifted with legal emancipation and some of which were not. One could list in general terms the goals that former slaves in many societies sought and in some cases enunciated explicitly: access to land, freedom from violence, political voice, respect for individual dignity, integrity of their families, education for their children. But we are still a long way from identifying the relative importance of these different goals in different societies and contexts. Freedom was, in Barbara Fields's phrase, "a constantly moving target."\textsuperscript{41} But it was not everywhere an identical target.

The purpose of an exploration of the elements of continued oppression and successful challenge is not the academic exercise of asking whose misery was more severe, of measuring the physical terror of racist violence in the U.S. South against the crushing poverty of the Brazilian Northeast or the colonial tyranny of Cuba. It can instead be part of an effort to comprehend the goals of different individuals and groups in order to comprehend choices and actions. To return to the case of Cuba: thousands of former slaves and their descendants were prepared to join in a long, bloody struggle to achieve political independence from Spain. They put aside the immediate pursuit of land or education and took enormous risks as part of a nationalist movement that was also a movement for social change. The study of the "meaning of freedom" for Cuban slaves thus exceeds

\textsuperscript{40} Gibson, Aztecs, 405.

\textsuperscript{41} Fields, Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground, 193.
the limits of the immediate postemancipation adjustments, encompassing a series of larger questions about political and social mobilization and participation. We will better understand the choices those rebels made to the extent that we can comprehend their own perception of the forms of their oppression, and the resultant selection of targets for resistance. 42

Perhaps some of the research strategies outlined here can begin to provide detailed portraits of economic and social options and constraints faced by former slaves, and thus illuminate the patterns of their individual and collective behavior. At the same time, we will need to listen for the faint echoes of the voices of the participants themselves. One might recall that it was Gibson's close reading of Indian títulos, in conjunction with his study of the evolution of property in the Valley of Mexico, that convinced him that land encroachment was the primary preoccupation and grievance of the indigenous population. 43 We need, I think, to continue to seek out similar kinds of documentation for postemancipation societies, and similar ways of reading such documentation. 44 A reading of those documents that reflect the voices of the participants may help us carry out the task of determining which elements of subordination weighed most heavily on former slaves, and which they could successfully resist or turn to their own use.

It is perhaps appropriate, then, to give the last word to a slave woman from rural Matanzas, in Cuba. She worked on the Ingenio Mercedes and was known to the master as Elvira, though the other slaves called her Paloma. On the morning of April 21, 1879, in the tumultuous final year of formal slavery in Cuba, the overseer roused her and told her to begin work piling dry cane stalks. 45 On that day, two other slaves of the estate

42. On the 1895–98 conflict, see, among other studies, Pérez, Cuba Between Empires, 1878–1902 (Pittsburgh, 1983). In “Politics, Peasants, and People of Color,” Pérez uses an analysis of targets as a means for reevaluating the goals of events in 1912 that have generally been characterized as a “race war.”

43. Gibson, Aztecs, 405.

44. Two concerted efforts to locate such material for the U.S. South are Leon F. Litwack, Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery (New York, 1979) and the volumes of Berlin et al., Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation. The WPA slave narratives are also a classic source. Very little material of this kind has been located for Brazil, though Reis makes some interesting suggestions in “From Banguê to Usina.” The richness of the evidence in Mary C. Karasch, Slave Life in Rio de Janeiro, 1808–1850 (Princeton, 1987) suggests that documents on Afro-Brazilian brotherhoods and religious organizations might be particularly valuable for the postenslavement period. Some parallel material on Cuban cabildos is available in the Cuban national archives. (See Scott, Slave Emancipation, 265–268.) Libertos appeals for passports to travel to Africa appear in the archives in Bahia, in northeastern Brazil, and might be read for the light they cast on libertos' perceptions of conditions in the province itself. See Arquivo Provincial do Estado da Bahia, Seção Histórica, maços 6346, 6347.

45. Slavery was legally abolished in Cuba in 1880, but was replaced by a form of
were being held in stocks, bound by leg irons. Paloma’s response to the Overseer reflected a mixture of exhaustion and determination. She said to him

that he was always in a hurry, that here justice ordered blacks into the stocks to die of hunger, that that was what they knew how to do, and to this the Overseer said to her: be silent, negra; Elvira answered that she was within her rights to speak and that no one could take that away from her. The Overseer said again that she should be silent; and she answered him that she did not wish to and that no one could silence her. . . .

The Overseer slapped Paloma; she came back at him; he whipped her; she fled; he pursued her on horseback and returned her to the estate. The incident exploded into a near-revolt as the Overseer attempted to put Paloma in chains and other slaves came to her defense, threatening to take to the hills. Paloma was released; the “riot” was suppressed; the slaves grudgingly returned to their work “refunfuñándose más o menos entre dientes.”

The challenge of postemancipation studies, in effect, is to follow Paloma and her companions. In 1879, she was concerned with the pace of work, with hunger, and with justice and punishment. At the same time, she already phrased her own entitlement to speak her mind as a claim of right. In the years that followed, how would she judge the society that emerged, along these multiple dimensions of work, hunger, and justice? And how would she choose to act when her evidently indomitable spirit was again moved by exhaustion, by frustration, or by an emboldening claim of right?

“apprenticeship” that obliged former slaves to continue to labor for their former masters. Apprenticeship was abolished in 1886.

46. The account of this incident appears in leg. 20/34, Fondo de Esclavos, Archivo Histórico Provincial de Matanzas. I am very much indebted to Professor Juan Francisco González, of the Instituto Superior Pedagógico de Matanzas, for providing me with a transcription of it.