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Slavery and the Economy of Sao Paolo, 1750-1850

Francisco Vidal Lunas
University of São Paulo (retired)

Herbert S. Klein
Columbia University, hsk1@columbia.edu

James Oakes
CUNY

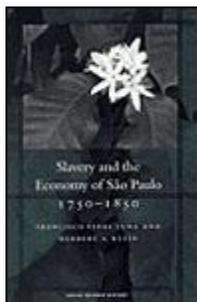
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Book Review



H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Francisco Vidal Luna and Herbert S. Klein, *Slavery and the Economy of Sao Paolo, 1750-1850*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003. xii and 273 pp. \$26 (paperback), ISBN: 0-8047-4859-4.

Reviewed for H-Slavery by James Oakes, Department of History, CUNY Graduate Center.

Sao Paulo is doing well these days, and it's all because of sugar. It seems that sugar cane produces ethanol at least eight, and possibly ten, times more efficiently than corn. With some well placed incentives from the government, plus Volkswagen's introduction of dual fuel automobiles a few years back, Brazilians have developed a flourishing market in home-grown energy. The once depressed sugar fields around Sao Paolo have come back to life, with an efficiency that puts the U.S. ethanol industry to shame. But we should not be surprised. As Francisco Vidal Luna and Herbert Klein show in *Slavery and the Economy of Sao Paolo, 1750-1850*, ever since the eighteenth century the region has prospered as a savvy producer of commercial crops.

For U.S. historians, the history of slavery in Brazil continues to shake loose one preconception after another about the nature of new world slave economies. As youngsters we were assured that slavery was incompatible with urban life, only to discover that at the height of the slave trade Rio de Janeiro was a bustling metropolis with a diversified economy with slavery at its core. We were told that slavery encouraged a stifling monoculture, only to learn that Brazilian slaves produced not only sugar and coffee, but corn, grains, and livestock; they dug the gold from inland mines and manned the docks of Brazilian ports. In large numbers Brazilian slaves were sailors, soldiers, and factory workers. Not since the fall of Rome were slaves put to such varied uses in such large numbers. Moreover, they worked efficiently and their work set in motion a pattern of sustained economic growth that survived the downfall of slavery.

Luna and Klein follow right along this revisionist pathway, demolishing yet another generalization that has long hovered over the historiography of slavery in the New World: that sugar plantations did not produce the food they needed to sustain themselves. That may have been true in the Caribbean, and even in northern Brazil. But it was not true in

the Sao Paulo region. Perhaps because the region grew slowly, in the shadow of the sugar producers of Rio de Janeiro to the north and the gold mines of neighboring Minas Gerais, Sao Paulo's commercial agriculture took root as a producer of food supplies for the bigger, more heavily enslaved economies nearby. Once sugar plantations did develop, particularly in the rich inland soils of the West Paulista region, the production of food crops was a well established habit that the sugar planters never abandoned.

Based on the extensive use of recently discovered censuses of population and production, Luna and Klein trace with meticulous care the origins and growth of sugar plantations in the Sao Paulo region. They distinguish between the Valley of Paraiba -- closer to the coast, more influenced by Rio, and in the end less prosperous -- and the interior West Paulista -- far from the market centers with poor roads, it began as a region of subsistence farms and Indian slaves but went on to become a rich center of diversified commercial agriculture based first on sugar and later, in the nineteenth century, on coffee.

The turning points for Sao Paulo were the relative decline of Brazilian sugar with the growth of the Caribbean plantations, the discovery of gold in Minas Gerais, and the frontier wars with Spain. Gold brought slaves in large numbers to the region, providing Sao Paulo farmers with a market for their food crops. War led the Portuguese to invest in Sao Paulo's infrastructure, giving its farmers better access to regional, national and then international markets.

With commercial agriculture and access to markets well established, Sao Paulo transformed itself between 1750 and 1800 into one of the major sugar plantation economies of the world. The censuses make it possible to track this development in various ways: the increasing size of the plantations, the growing number and proportion of slaves, as well as the rising sex ratio of the slave population, and the rising output per slave.

But the thing that strikes the authors above all is the fact that the *paulista* economy never abandoned the production of foodstuffs, for both subsistence and sale. Rice and beans, corn and pork, and a host of lesser items, were produced for sale by small farmers and large planters, by those owning only one or two slaves and by those owning dozens, by those who produced nothing but foodstuffs and by those who produced mostly sugar and coffee. And this remained true even as the growth of sugar and coffee plantations increased the concentration of land and slaveholdings. "Thus, the bedrock of *paulista* agriculture remained food-crop production," the authors conclude, "which expanded along with the export crops during the first part of the nineteenth century" (p. 106).

There was a time when U.S. historians imagined that the antebellum South stood alone among New World slave societies in its ability to feed itself. No more. In both Brazil and the South, slaves provided some but not all of their subsistence, and small farmers could prosper by producing food crops for sale in local and regional markets. Even the distribution of slaves was roughly comparable: Luna and Klein find slaves in perhaps 20 to 25 percent of Sao Paulo households; most owners had only a few slaves; and plantations with more than a hundred slaves were rare.

Not so the slave population. Except for a blip in the first decade of the nineteenth century, the proportion of Africans in the slave population steadily declined in the United States from the middle of the eighteenth century onward, until by 1860 native Africans were a tiny fraction among the slaves. The reverse was true in Sao Paulo, where the rise of sugar and coffee depended on a steadily rising proportion of Africans among the slaves, until by the mid-nineteenth century they were "the dominant element in the slave labor force" (p. 133). The massive importation of African men skewed the slave population, depriving it of women of childbearing age and thus depressing the ability of the slave population to reproduce itself. In addition, Luna and Klein cite recent scholarship suggesting that the disproportionate manumission of women in Brazil also helped prevent the slave population from achieving robust reproduction rates. (This contrasts sharply with the U.S. experience, where the near absence of manumission, combined with the relative insignificance of lethal sugar plantations, allowed southern slaves to reproduce themselves rapidly without any further imports from Africa.) Paradoxically, the rising dominance of males in the slave population did not alter the fact that a majority of *paulista* slave children -- like their counterparts in the American South -- grew up in fatherless households.

In the American South there was no large slave sector of the southern economy outside of plantation agriculture, nothing comparable to the mining sector of Brazil -- which provided the first important market for *paulista* food producers. Nor was there anything in the South remotely comparable to the huge proportion of free blacks in Brazil. Of the 91,000 Africans and their descendants in Sao Paulo in 1803, more than half (47,000) were free colored. Besides being disproportionately young women, freed slaves were disproportionately mulattoes, with the result that the free colored class had the largest concentration of *pardos* (browns) in the population. These differences showed up as well in the distribution of wealth. Free colored households were less likely to have slaves, and those that did were likely to have fewer slaves. As Luna and Klein note, this may be less the result of racial bias against free coloreds than of their original impoverishment as slaves.

In a final chapter the authors explore one other element in Sao Paulo's economic diversity - the high proportion (40%) of *paulista* households employed outside of agriculture altogether. By U.S. standards, this is quite high for a region whose economy was based in plantation agriculture. These households ranged all the way from impoverished day laborers, to craftsmen, to professionals, to wealthy merchants. These merchants, with strong ties to the planters and the export economy, were the wealthiest and most powerful group in the region. By the time readers finish the book the enduring success of Sao Paulo's economy is easy to understand -- which is precisely what the authors hoped to accomplish.

There is not one thing wrong with this book. Luna and Klein have done impressive research in previously unused sources. They present their findings in clear, unpretentious prose. They have a firm sense of the historical as well as historiographical significance of their material. They make apt comparisons along the way. All in all, *Slavery and the Economy of Sao Paulo* is a model monograph, nothing less than we have come to expect from its distinguished authors.

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