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978-0-521-69410-0 - The Comparative Histories of Slavery in Brazil, Cuba, and the United States

Laird W. Bergad

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THE COMPARATIVE HISTORIES OF
SLAVERY IN BRAZIL, CUBA, AND
THE UNITED STATES

This book is an introductory history of racial slavery in the Americas. Brazil and Cuba were among the first colonial societies to establish slavery in the early sixteenth century. Approximately a century later British colonial Virginia was founded, and slavery became an integral part of local culture and society. In all three nations, slavery spread to nearly every region, and in many areas it was the principal labor system utilized by rural and urban elites.

Yet long after it had been abolished elsewhere in the Americas, slavery stubbornly persisted in the three nations. It took a destructive Civil War in the United States to bring an end to racial slavery in the southern states in 1865. In 1886 slavery was officially ended in Cuba, and in 1888 Brazil finally abolished this dreadful institution, and legalized slavery in the Americas came to an end.

Laird W. Bergad was born and raised in Pittsburgh. He attended the University of Wisconsin, where he received his B.A. in history in 1970. He then lived and worked in various jobs in Puerto Rico before enrolling in graduate school at the University of Pittsburgh, where he received his Ph.D. degree in Latin American and Caribbean history in 1980. He has traveled widely through Latin America and has lived for extended periods in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Brazil. He has written and published four previous books about rural slave-based societies during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Brazil: *Coffee and the Growth of Agrarian Capitalism in Puerto Rico* (1983); *Cuban Rural Society in the 19th Century* (1990); *The Cuban Slave Market, 1790–1880* (coauthored, Cambridge 1995); and *Slavery and the Demographic and Economic History of Minas Gerais, Brazil, 1720–1888* (Cambridge 1999). Bergad has been the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, two Fulbright Fellowships, and an NEH Fellowship, among other grants and honors. He is the founding director of the City University of New York's Center for Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino Studies.

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*Lehman College and
The Graduate Center
City University of New York*



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Frontmatter

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Ruth Bergad. Her life centered on her family, for whom she was a model of dedication, kindness, warmth, selflessness, dignity, humility, pride, toughness, and love. She embodied these basic human values, and they have inspired me throughout my life. Mom, I can see you putting this one on the shelf with the others, and I know you would have quelled, as usual.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

<i>List of Maps and Figures</i>	<i>page</i>	x
<i>Introduction</i>		xi
1 From Colonization to Abolition: Patterns of Historical Development in Brazil, Cuba, and the United States		i
2 The Diversity of Slavery in the Americas to 1790		33
3 Slaves in Their Own Words		64
4 Slave Populations		96
5 Economic Aspects		132
6 Making Space		165
7 Resistance and Rebellions		202
8 Abolition		251
<i>Bibliography</i>		291
<i>Index</i>		303

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Laird W. Bergad

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

MAPS AND FIGURES

MAPS

4.1	U.S. Old South and New South states	<i>page</i> 115
4.2	North, center, and south states in Brazil	122
4.3	West, center, and east in Cuba	130

FIGURES

5.1	Indexed slave price movements in New Orleans, Cuba, and Minas Gerais, Brazil, 1850–1860	158
5.2	Trend lines for indexed slave price movements in New Orleans, Cuba, and Minas Gerais, Brazil, 1850–1860	159
5.3	U.S. cotton production, Cuban sugar production, and Brazilian coffee exports by volume, 1821–1860	160
5.4	Indexed sugar, cotton, and coffee prices in the United States, 1850–1860, in real prices using U.S. “deflators”	161

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

The African slave trade and slavery were among the great human tragedies in the development of the Americas. There were few colonies or nations founded by European powers where slaves of African descent were not found in significant numbers at some point in their histories. The institution of slavery and forced labor in one form or another was a part of all cultures – African, Asian, European, and in the indigenous societies of the Americas prior to European colonization. But it was only in the Americas that slavery developed as an institution based upon race. Although indigenous peoples were first enslaved by Spanish and Portuguese conquerors during the prolonged processes of discovery, conquest, and colonization initiated by the Columbus voyages of the late fifteenth century, by the 1550s only those of African descent could be enslaved according to legal codes. Scholars have debated why race-based slavery developed in the Americas on such a pervasive scale after 1500. They have arrived at the generalized conclusion that the European colonial powers became reluctant to enslave peoples who were racially similar to themselves, even though this had been the case for centuries within nearly all European cultures. Africans were so unlike Europeans from racial, religious, and cultural perspectives that it became morally and politically acceptable to enslave them. All kinds of philosophical and religious reasons were constructed by Europeans to justify the exclusive enslavement of peoples of African descent. These ranged from extraordinarily racist frameworks that depicted Africans as genetically inferior peoples who were fundamentally different from Europeans, to self-serving paternalistic concepts in which Europeans portrayed enslavement as a strategy for bringing culture, civilization, and

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

religion to Africans. By the late eighteenth century, however, these justifications had come under scrutiny by religious figures, philosophers, humanists, and eventually politicians. Gradually it became morally and politically unacceptable to maintain African-descended peoples in slavery, and this dreadful system of human exploitation was slowly dismantled.

Brazil and Cuba were among the first colonial societies to establish slavery in the early sixteenth century. Approximately a century later British colonial Virginia was founded, and slavery became an integral part of local culture and society. In all three nations slavery spread to nearly every region, and in many areas it was the principal labor system utilized by rural and urban elites. Slavery developed nearly everywhere in the Americas, but the revolutionary upheavals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries gradually led to emancipation throughout the hemisphere. In French Haiti, slaves themselves abolished slavery through violent revolution and the formation of an independent nation in a series of wars that began in 1791 and ended only in 1804. The gradual emancipation of slaves took place in the northern states of the United States after the triumph of the American Revolution in the 1780s. The independent nations of Latin America that emerged in the 1820s after a series of revolutionary wars against Spain put into place laws that would forever abolish slave labor by the 1850s. In the early 1830s the British abolished slavery in their Caribbean colonies, and the French followed in 1848.

Scholars have debated why exactly slavery persisted for so long in the Americas. Explanations have varied considerably. Many have tied the end of slavery to the rationalism of the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment, the advent of democratic political forms in the North Atlantic world, and the development of capitalism as an economic system reflecting rational thinking and political democracy. In this view, slavery became obsolete as a labor system and ultimately was unproductive because of advancing industrialization and the widespread development of wage labor as a more economically rational way of organizing the labor force. Others have interpreted the demise of slavery in the context of the spreading humanitarian ideas that swept through Western Europe and the United States toward the end of the eighteenth and through the nineteenth century, as well as the religious revivalism that influenced broad population sectors during the same period.

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Laird W. Bergad

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xiii

Yet long after it had been abolished elsewhere in the Americas slavery stubbornly persisted in Brazil, Cuba, and the southern United States, and there was little inclination on the part of slaveholders or political elites to end this barbaric system of human exploitation. It took a destructive Civil War in the United States to bring an end to racial slavery in the southern states in 1865. Even in the aftermath of emancipation in the American South, slavery remained central to Cuba and Brazil until the 1880s, when a series of internal and external factors forced political elites to end the institution. In 1886 slavery was officially ended in Cuba, and in 1888 Brazil finally abolished this dreadful institution. After nearly five centuries, with its horrific toll in human lives destroyed or severely damaged, racial slavery was finally over in the Americas, although racism and systematic discrimination against those of African descent have remained to the present.

This book has been written as a general introductory history designed for those who are not familiar, or who are only vaguely familiar, with the theme of slavery in the Americas. It focuses upon the nations in which slavery lasted the longest and relies on the pioneering works of other scholars, which have been synthesized to consider some of the many general topics found in the historical literature of all three countries. Specialists will not find every aspect of the slave experience included here. General readers, information seekers, and undergraduate and beginning graduate students will encounter a broad array of themes that may whet intellectual appetites for more specialized readings.

The idea for this book was first put forth by Stan Engerman and Frank Smith, who had a somewhat different initial vision. At a conference organized in Rochester, New York, to honor Stan's pioneering and monumental body of work, I presented a paper on comparative slave markets in the three countries during the 1850s.¹ When my panel was over I walked to the back of the room, where Stan and Frank were sitting, and they called me over to suggest that I embellish my presentation into a short book. Herb Klein supported the idea, and without much hesitation I accepted. As I started thinking through how I would approach the topic, it quickly occurred to me that there was no general comparative history of slavery that focused upon the three nations. Accordingly, the chronological parameter of the book was

¹ The proceedings have been published in David Eltis, Frank Lewis, and Kenneth Sokoloff, editors, *Slavery in the Development of the Americas* (New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv

INTRODUCTION

broadened, and after work that proceeded in fits and starts over a four-year period in various locales, the book was completed. I want to thank Stan, Frank, and Herb for the original idea and for their encouragement. I also want to thank Jim Oakes for his careful reading of the chapter on abolition and his many invaluable suggestions that have been incorporated into the text in the sections on the United States.

Trancoso, Bahia, Brazil

August 2006