

# *Slavery and the Economy of São Paulo, 1750-1850*

by Francisco Vidal Luna and Herbert S. Klein

Publisher: Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003, pp. 273.

Review by Jonathan B. Wight

*Department of Economics University of Richmond  
Richmond, VA 23173  
jwight@richmond.edu  
(804) 289-8570*

**G**ilberto Freyre's portrayal of Brazilian slavery in large plantations dominated a generation's perspective. Since the 1960s this view has come under attack for a number of important reasons. Scholarship has chipped away at Freyre's monocular (and sometimes sanguine) depiction of the Brazilian slave experience. Two distinguished scholars, Francisco Vidal Luna (an economist) and Herbert S. Klein (an historian), combine their talents in *Slavery and the Economy of São Paulo, 1750-1850* to make a significant contribution to this literature.

Using previously unpublished population and production censuses discovered in state archives, the authors catalog the diversity and complexity of the actual slave experience in south-central Brazil prior to the mid-nineteenth century. The authors conclude that small slave holdings, small plantation sizes, and a low ratio of slave owners to the population existed in São Paulo and Minas Gerais prior to the coffee boom of the late nineteenth century. This fascinating account will likely become a required text for future scholars on the history of slavery in the Americas.

Although the book's emphasis is on the hundred year period from the mid-eighteenth century, it begins with a thorough account of the founding of São Paulo (formerly São Vicente) as a base for inland exploration and exploitation. While São Paulo remained a backwater demographically, economically, and politically for 250 years, important pre-conditions for an economic take-off were being laid. Just as economists once mistakenly viewed the Middle Ages as stagnant and without innovation, so too have social scientists neglected the dynamism of the colonial and early independence periods in São Paulo. In reflecting on the future "take-off" of the late nineteenth century, the authors note: "That this growth could occur so rapidly in a few short decades was due, as we have argued in this work, to the creation of a dynamic planter class, a complex market, and more modern

*The authors conclude that small slave holdings, small plantation sizes, and a low ratio of slave owners to the population existed in São Paulo and Minas Gerais prior to the coffee boom of the late nineteenth century*

transport network, all of which occurred in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries before the rise of coffee" (p. 208).

This transformation—and the fulfillment of important pre-conditions for a take-off—is the subject of this book, examined through the lens of entrepreneurial expansion and mobilization of labor.

The shortage of labor, which was a perennial problem in the land-rich Americas, led to the initial cooption and enslavement of Indians. The authors note that, "in no other region of the Americas had Indian slaves and Indian and mestizo free workers been so fully integrated into a white-dominated colonial regime" (p. 11).

The relentless push to clear virgin land was labor-intensive considering the lack of domestic animals and the employment of primitive tools (hoe, sickle, and ax). Transportation within the highland interior and from the interior to the coast was literally a back-breaking endeavor with Indians serving as pack mules. When paulista explorers found and developed the mines of Minas Gerais in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, capital became available for the expansion of agriculture. Rather than monoculture, São Paulo's early farmers focused on subsistence production and exports of surplus foodstuffs to neighboring regions, as well as the small-scale manufacture of sugar and sugar byproducts for local consumption.

The demography of the region changed dramatically as a result of the new capital. Of primary interest to the authors is the rapid replacement of Indian slaves with more expensive imported African slaves during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. After 1791 changing world economic conditions also provided strong incentives for enlarged

production of sugar for export, and later, after the first quarter of the nineteenth century, for the introduction of coffee.

History of this era is predominately shaped by the fragmented and idiosyncratic writings of travelers and other contemporaneous accounts. What makes this book's research so valuable is that the authors took a different approach, utilizing the discovery of state archival records which took them fifteen years to collect and analyze. This is serious scholarship at its finest. To give just a small sampling, the census data for some years includes numbers of slaves, slave owners, free persons of color, percentage of slaves by type of agriculture, sex ratio of slaves, children of slaves, marital status of slaves, productive output of various food, export crops, and livestock, and so on. From this extraordinary record the authors are able to construct a rich demographic and economic history of São Paulo over this period.

One surprise that comes to light is the extent to which Indian, and later African, slaves were used to produce food products for subsistence and for local (rather than export) markets. The authors note that this characteristic is, "one of the distinguishing features of Brazilian slavery" (p. 80). Almost one-quarter of food producing family farms contained slaves, although most had only two or three slaves that toiled alongside family members. This fact explains the low rate of fertility among slaves on these farms, as compared to large plantations, since a low coincidence of mates was available. These slaves likely shared a not-too-dissimilar poverty with their slave masters. The authors note that "Rare were the great slave owners pictured in the works of Gilberto Freyre, at least before the middle of the nineteenth century in São Paulo" (p. 131). This experience was true in most other states and regions, they note, with

This book is and will remain a significant resource for scholars

the exception of those Northeast counties most heavily involved in sugar.

Today, São Paulo is the industrial and agricultural powerhouse of Latin America. *Slavery and the Economy of São Paulo* is a major contribution to the literature on the state's origin and development. Despite this achievement, the lens of history remains clouded. This is a book of applauses, of admiration for the adventures and ambitions of the early settlers. The authors convey an unqualified pride in entrepreneurial achievement. They extol the "dynamism" of the planter class and its ability to "mobilize" the labor force to enhance production. These words are euphemisms that mask a harsh reality. Economists and historians should be cautious when mixing their significant factual findings (the labor demographics) with normative descriptions about those findings. To do so, as in this

case, is to portray slavery as a benign instrumental variable in economic development, as necessary for a dynamic economy as capital and land. Implicitly, authority is given to a Panglossian and consequentialist perspective that if the outcome is worthy and desirable (economic growth) then the moral mechanism that makes it possible (slavery) is irrelevant. Workers (slaves or free) are simply treated as inputs in production.

In a balanced view of history the warts are more fully revealed. It is beyond the scope of this work to do so, although this is a clear line for future investigation. This research does highlight the contribution of slaves to the economy, implying a degree of hard work, determination, striving, and skill that go against the grain of traditional thinking about slave economies. This book is and will remain a significant resource for scholars.

