

O direito dos escravos: Lutas jurídicas e abolicionismo na província de São Paulo.

By ELCIENE AZEVEDO. Coleção Várias Histórias. São Paulo: Editora da Unicamp, 2010. Notes. Bibliography. 245 pp. Paper, R\$29.00.

This book is a must-read for historians of slave emancipation in Brazil. In revisiting the broad influence of juridical struggles for freedom during the first collective abolitionist mobilizations of the late 1860s, and then tracing the persisting force of such practices through the 1870s and early 1880s, Azevedo convincingly recasts the 20-year period of social struggle prior to the 1888 abolition law as significantly more fluid and interconnected than historians have previously allowed. In a word, Azevedo blurs the conventional periodization that separates the so-called legalistic or gradual phase (pre-1880) of abolitionist activism from the better-known immediatist or radical stage (1880-88). In one of the book's best-developed sections, she shows that the politicization of freedom suits prior to the 1871 Free Womb Law had a similar galvanizing effect on popular activism as did the more familiar juridical struggles of the 1880s; both processes mobilized slaves, law students, associational groups, journalists, and scores of ordinary people who were called as witnesses.

Focused on the not-unfamiliar story of abolition in São Paulo province, this work succeeds in illuminating new connections between the legal and public spaces of abolitionism. Similarly, it provides a refreshingly nuanced example of how to integrate analysis of slave agency within wider processes of social and political change. The broader argument for stretching the conventional periodization of abolitionism deserves careful attention and should well inspire new questions about the trajectories of abolitionist mobilizations.

The multifaceted career of the Afro-Brazilian abolitionist Luiz Gama structures the chronological arc of *O direito dos escravos*. The book is informed, of course, by Azevedo's acclaimed 1999 biography of Luiz Gama, yet in its framing and conclusions, it is an original work. Gama's experiences as a legal representative, police clerk, newspaper editor, and associational leader afford Azevedo an intriguing vantage point on the entangled worlds of the judiciary, the press, and political bodies. Developed in three substantive

chapters, the focus is on the relationship between the legal challenges to slavery and the emergent calls for abolition.

In chapter 2, Azevedo details how freedom suits made the issue of emancipation into a problem for both property holders and the state. She suggests that it was through the presentation of over 300 freedom suits in 1869 and 1870 that a “movement” to end slavery coalesced in São Paulo city (p. 109). Azevedo posits that cases focusing on the illegal importation of Africans after 1831 were instrumental to the production of an abolitionist discourse. She connects the presentation of these cases to a public conference in São Paulo city in 1869, where the young Rui Barbosa spoke openly about abolishing slavery since “an immense majority [of the enslaved] were brought illegally, in violation of the 1831 law” (p. 110). Furthermore, the politicization of court cases in the press helped to normalize the idea that a slave’s right to freedom was a “natural” right. This notion appeared especially dangerous when invoked in the context of crimes against owners and overseers. From these points, Azevedo revises the problematic characterization of legal and pre-1880s abolitionism as moderate.

In chapter 3, Azevedo returns to the specific context—Gama’s funeral, ironically—where a new narrative about a more radical vision of abolitionism emerged. The public outpourings not only on the day of Gama’s death but also on subsequent anniversaries were key to the consolidation of a militant identity. New leaders such as Antonio Bento, who famously stirred mass slave insurrections in the late 1880s, increasingly asserted themselves as part of a new wave of activists, and early histories of emancipation replicated this schema. As Azevedo reminds us, however, during the intense period of mobilization in the late 1860s, Bento was conspicuously absent. Azevedo suggests, albeit in less detail than elsewhere, that Bento’s continued work with legal abolitionism during the 1880s represents another form of continuity between the pre- and post-Gama eras.

This is, in short, a rich work that artfully blends legal, social, and cultural approaches to emancipation. It is a book that, nevertheless, assumes readers to possess a considerable amount of prior knowledge on both the topic and the place; there is minimal attempt, for one, to establish a proper context for the provincial enslaved population, a phenomenon that we know was in flux because of the inter- and intraregional slave trades. For example, the introduction of some 40,000 enslaved people into the province during the 1870s may have influenced the intensity of the juridical struggles as well as the ways that antislavery sensibilities crystallized. This does not detract, however, from an important work that scholars of Brazilian slave emancipation will find much to reckon with among its larger and finer points.

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