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The Practicality of Slavery in Latin America

Abstract

Christopher Schmidt-Nowara's book, *Slavery, Freedom, and Abolition in Latin America and the Atlantic World*, addresses the fact that Latin America has always been a place of great struggles and triumphs. While inconsistency and danger have always had a stronghold in this place, serious traditions have developed as well. Slavery is one of the most apparent examples of this; an analysis of how it functioned is highly revealing of the historical past. Without it, the development of Latin America would have been far less productive. It was an economic gold mine that was integrated into society and that was why people clung to it so much. Slavery was so resilient in Latin America because it worked well and was a key component of Latin American identity that people did not want to give up. This is evident by analyzing the progression of slavery and its termination.

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Amy Werner

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When explorers such as Columbus and Cortés established footholds in the New World, they did not just bring material items with them. Entire customs and traditions were shared with the newly encountered Indians. While development differed from place to place, the people of the Old World quickly took control over the New World with help from diseases and advanced weaponry, which shaped how slavery was later introduced into new societies. For example, Brazil and Spanish America had different systems of incorporating slavery into society because Brazil had a direct connection with Africa that Spanish America did not have.¹ The founding country of a new territory imported identity and cultural values just as much, if not more, as it imported goods. This fact is important to keep in mind because of how it affected slavery later on.

Though Indians were used as labor at first, African slaves quickly became the first choice for slave labor. This trend was mainly due to the ease with which they were purchased in large quantities and their ability to survive under the harshest of conditions. Cash crops such as coffee, tobacco, and especially sugar required constant labor to produce large quantities. Plantation labor is what drove the slave trade most strongly.² The new capitalist mentality that affected the economy also affected the slave trade. The days of subsistence living were over. This was particularly relevant during the nineteenth century when technology improved the efficiency of cash crop production. Factories that produced sugar required massive amounts of slave labor to turn a profit. Though societies were becoming more advanced, the conditions of the slaves who fueled the economy did not improve.

Slavery is a broad term to use when considering the many kinds of work

1. Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *Slavery, Freedom, and Abolition in Latin America and the Atlantic World* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011), 145.

2. *Ibid.*, 5.

that are done to create a functioning society. There were many jobs that slaves did, such as farming, mining, and housework. Though life was harsh for a slave in an urban or rural setting, there was a clear-cut difference between the standards of living for each. As Schmidt-Nowara wrote, "Slave workers in the diamond strikes labored under close scrutiny at the workplace. However, their condition differed from the enslaved workers on the plantations."³ Slave owners had great power and influence over the kind of lives their slaves would lead. While greed caused many slave owners to treat their human property as cheaply as possible, some were more lenient than others. A slave's gender was another factor that determined their quality of life. In fact, female slaves were much more likely to be freed than male slaves; this is particularly because of their "ties of affection" to powerful slave owners.⁴ Understanding factors such as these makes it clear how slaves adapted to and functioned within the society they helped create.

The profitability of slavery meant that it was significant from its inception. Slavery helped create and perpetuate the societies that formed around it. Populations boomed because of the work that slaves did to make valuable products for new economies. This, in turn, sparked the need for more slaves to make more products. People were aware that a society's success was dependent on its economic stability. For example, funding an army big enough to completely defend a country required money. This money was acquired through a strong economy fueled by slaves; therefore, slavery was absolutely vital to a country's success.⁵ However, this was not the only way slaves contributed to society.

Unlike in the United States, manumission was common in Latin America. Once slaves were freed or purchased their freedom, they became members of society. Freed slaves had their social rank in society; although it was fairly low, they contributed to the caste system and perpetuated their society's culture, which was important to the newly forming colonies because it shaped identities.

Slavery's deep roots in the development of Latin America shaped identity in a way that made it impervious to change for hundreds of years. People were not willing to let go of a main part of their culture. Though slavery was cruel, Latin American societies would not easily recognize this because of their distorted perspectives. Justifications, such as religion, often made slave owners feel it was their duty to continue slavery for the sake of their slaves. This assumption reduced cognitive dissonance. Transporting all kinds of goods, including humans, was a main aspect of the New World identity; this was hard to prevent.⁶ Latin America was the place where many people tried to make better lives for themselves and their children, and slaves were needed to fulfill that dream. Identity helped establish, promote, and perpetuate slavery, but resistance to change was also significant in the continuation of human bondage.

3. *Ibid.*, 75.

4. *Ibid.*, 88.

5. *Ibid.*, 80.

6. *Ibid.*, 8.

Traditions form when identities take hold over a long enough period of time. Slavery was engrained into Latin American society as an entirely legitimate tradition with an incredibly long history. Manumission made the system seem slightly less cruel because slaves could purchase their freedom. Slaves were also seen as a status symbol that was accessible to even the lower classes of society. Brazil was a country that progressed uniquely over time compared to other Latin American countries. Their slave society had existed since the sixteenth century and continued well into the nineteenth century, unlike places such as the Antilles.⁷ It is understandable that Brazil would be the last Western country to abolish slavery, considering it relied on it much more than other countries and had been part of society for a significant amount of time. While this is also a factor in the resilience of Latin American slavery, the strongest reason is simple and much harsher.

As evolution has demonstrated, systems that function well tend to last a long time. Slavery was so resilient in Latin America because it truly worked. Although it may have lasted for some time without functioning properly, it would not have endured for hundreds of years if it did not benefit enough people. Indentured servitude was another form of labor, but it did not last long because it was impractical. Procuring enough servants at a low price was near impossible; this encouraged colonists to turn to Africa for their labor needs.⁸ In other words, when one system failed, a new one was born to fulfill the needs of the people. Africa did not run out of slaves, and freed slaves were able to buy slaves, which perpetuated the system even more. Latin American slavery was flexible and fueled the economy. It made the rich richer and provided them with more power over others. People were not willing to give up this kind of wealth until abolitionism grew stronger and decreased slavery's practicality; money was more important than morals. Ending slavery was quite the struggle for abolitionists. Although they were eventually successful, this difficulty served as a testament to the powers of slavery.

Abolition came in several different forms and took a global effort to be effective. Britain, in particular, took strides toward ending slavery. As Schmidt-Nowara put it, "Combining religious fervor, economic liberalism, and mass political mobilization, British antislavery efforts drove Parliament to outlaw the slave traffic to the British colonies in 1807 and were a crucial factor in the suppression of slavery in the 1830s."⁹ Latin American independence was tied to British trading interests and both were connected to slavery. Although the United States was a role model in many ways for Latin America, its stance on slavery was not. Though independence was won in the late eighteenth century, slavery was not abolished until the Civil War ended. While this poor example did not propagate slavery, it did not help stop it either, which adds to the resilience of slavery. It would take much more effort and manipulation to end slavery.

8. *Ibid.*, 58.

9. *Ibid.*, 100.

Propaganda through literature was a common way abolitionists gained attention, but it was not the only way. Guerilla activists, such as Antonio Bento, led plantation raids where slaves were encouraged to run away in large numbers.¹⁰ The goal of this enterprise was to break the plantation system of exploited labor and thus end slavery. Another aspect of abolition to consider is that it was successful because the system of slavery failed as a whole; "Slavery in the British dominions was abolished during 1834-38, in part due to the pressure of the antislavery reform movement, but to a great extent because the economics of slavery had become less profitable."¹¹ Slavery was ended when it was no longer practical. The British were not the only abolitionists, but their support cannot be ignored. Abolition lasted throughout the nineteenth century; when it finally succeeded, Latin America took on new identities and adjusted to a lifestyle without human bondage. This shift greatly changed societies and helped thrust them into the modern era.

Slavery has been a part of history for thousands of years in nearly every part of the world, and it continues to be an issue to this day. Latin America is no exception, as evidenced by its long tradition of slavery in practically every form. It was integral to the foundation and success of the land, which was why it was so resistant to abolition. Although it can be unpleasant to admit, slavery worked and remained profitable for a long time. It was a part of the Latin American identity with effects that are still evident today. Slavery may have ended, but the injustices that help define Latin America have not.

10. *Ibid.*, 153.

11. Beatrice Hohenegger, *Liquid Jade: The Story of Tea from East to West* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 102.