

## Book Review

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**Celso Thomas Castilho. 2016. *Slave Emancipation and Transformations in Brazilian Political Citizenship*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.**

Current trends in the studies of abolitionism in Brazil have explored the agency of enslaved populations in their fight for emancipation. They have also developed important insights into the shaping of citizenship during the nineteenth century through debates on race, social belonging, and nation building. Celso Thomas Castilho, Assistant Professor of History at Vanderbilt University, in his most recent work titled *Slave Emancipation and Transformations in Brazilian Political Citizenship* (2016), greatly contributes to this field through the analysis of the social dynamics of rights-claiming during the contentious abolitionist debates of late nineteenth-century Recife. By focusing his research on the Northeast of Brazil, Castilho enriches studies of slavery and abolition which, according to Petrônio Domingues and Flávio Gomes,<sup>1</sup> lack greater investigation beyond the country's Southeastern region.

Castilho's focus on Recife, however, does not limit the research to the experiences of its population during the abolitionist period, as he includes regional, national, and international debates involving slavery and emancipation, placing Recife in a complex web of political, social, economic, and ideological decisions. He situates the reader into that heated historical moment between the 1860s and 1880s, providing an invigorating perspective on the interplay of power, influence, and the defining of citizenship between the slaveholders, abolitionists, state officials, the press, and ordinary people of the city. Through analysis of social actors from such varied backgrounds Castilho utilizes a historiographical approach that Jeffrey Needell defended as essential to understanding the "nature and timing of many of the phenomena" of late nineteenth century Brazil.<sup>2</sup> This approach, by focusing on the social aspects of slavery and abolition, does not, however, overlook the role of elites and politics during this period.

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<sup>1</sup> Flávio Gomes e Petrônio Domingues, "Apresentação", en *Políticas da raça: experiências e legados da abolição e da pós-emancipação no Brasil* (São Paulo: Selo Negro Edições, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey D. Needell, "Brazilian Abolitionism, Its Historiography, and the Uses of Political History," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 42, no. 2 (May 2010): 231–261.

Using a process-oriented approach, Castilho argues that the abolitionist movement in Recife created contentious debates over political belonging and invented practices and terms for affirming citizenship (11). For this purpose, he does not divide that movement in phases, but rather examines how different social groups interpreted and influenced the debates on slavery and abolition over time. Castilho uses records from abolitionist societies and theater, the press, and judicial proceedings by slaves to better grasp the population's understandings and actions surrounding emancipation.

The book is divided into six chapters in chronological order. It first explains how abolition became a "problem" in Brazil during the late 1860s, considering popular participation in that process. Then, it examines slave owners' attitudes after the promulgation of the 1871 Law of Free Birth. The last chapters focus on tensions arising from proslavery and abolitionist views on emancipation that resulted in the redefinition of regional and national political practices. The final chapter also offers a glimpse of how social relations were affected, after the promulgation of the Golden Law that abolished slavery in 1888, through novel and contested interpretations of citizenship among the freed, the abolitionists, and the conservatives. In his conclusion, Castilho proposes a reflection on the racial and political debates of the hundredth anniversary of the Golden Law in 1988. The inequality levels many Afro-Brazilians still faced at that time triggered protests that revealed new forms of citizenship-building and rights-claiming. In comparison to the events of 1888, their actions toward political belonging demonstrated how citizenship continued to work as a space for constant social re-creation, even a century later.

Castilho refutes the historical argument that claims a lack of significant support for emancipation in Brazil prior to 1871 (22). He offers important documentation showing that interest in abolition was alive at the provincial level, since Ceará, Santa Catarina, and Pernambuco States had created emancipation funds for the manumission of girls and women. At the social level, debates on emancipation were already ongoing in the 1860s as a result of events such as the U.S. Civil War, the Paraguayan War, and the liberation of African-descended peoples, which raised questions about the future of slavery. Those debates were possible, Castilho proposes, due to the strong presence of the printing press, which established its political and social relevance in the following decades during the abolitionist movement in Brazil.

One of the most important aspects of this work is certainly its emphasis on the popular presence in the re-creation of political identities from the 1860s to the postemancipation period. The abolitionist movement created opportunities for public participation at levels never before experienced in the history of Brazil, as Castilho so clearly uncovers in the context of Recife. Popular participation shaped the political scenario of the city, as law students, free and freed people of color, slaves, women, poets, and abolitionist politicians managed to develop a social project that aimed for a nation free from slavery. By developing, among other practices, an abolitionist theater in the city, abolitionist associations, public assemblies in the streets, and private campaigns to accumulate money for emancipation funds, Recife's abolitionists engaged with a regional and national movement that became impossible to ignore. The flow of ideas and attitudes among the popular classes reached the highest political levels of the empire, sparking reactions from its conservative sectors that used all their

resources at first to undermine and later to delay the abolitionist project. The clashes of minds and tension in the streets and in higher political ranks attest to the constant questioning of power throughout the abolition debates, in which different sectors of society contested and re-created their own political identity.

When considering gender, abolitionism tends to be a very male-oriented topic. Yet, Castilho manages to bring female participation into consideration through examples of petitions from slave mothers and analyses of the gendered approach given to emancipation funds in Pernambuco and elsewhere. The female presence in abolitionist associations and street campaigns, such as Ave Libertas in Recife, provides other examples of the author's attention to the voices of prominent as well as ordinary women in defining such an extraordinary historical period. Castilho also examines the relationship between Ave Libertas and male-oriented associations created in the city and demonstrates that, despite the lack of development of feminist ideas toward women's suffrage during the 1880s, women's strong presence in the abolitionist movement sparked initial reflections on female political participation.

*Slave Emancipation and Transformations in Brazilian Political Citizenship* is thus a must-read for scholars and students interested in understanding racial and social debates in the politics of citizenship-building during the last decades of nineteenth-century Brazil. It examines the relationship between the main historical figures of the time and the common people. It also expands knowledge by focusing on the Northeast, a region that played a significant role in the Brazilian slave emancipation process, as this study shows. Castilho's attention to the making of, rather than to the results of, abolition exposes important connections between varied social sectors, cities, and regions as well as international incidents that influenced the politics of slavery in Brazil. The writing style is very accessible and fluid. Detailed depictions of the situations examined allow the reader to develop a visual perspective of the city, public rallies, fights, and theater plays that might be even clearer had the book included images. This volume greatly contributes to the historiography of slavery, as it interprets abolition in Recife through the wider perspectives of citizenship-building within the Americas and Europe.