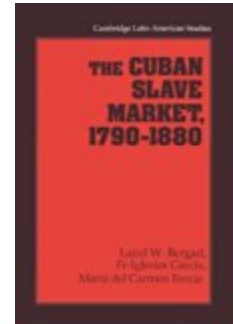


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Laird W. Bergad, Fe Iglesias Garcia, Maria del Carmen Barcia. *The Cuban Slave Market, 1790-1880*. New York and Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xxi + 245 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-48059-8.

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Published on H-LatAm (October, 1996)



Cuba and Slavery: Beancounters in the Caribbean

At last, Delphi speaks. But alas, she speaks in numbers, charts, tables, graphs, and appendices. The cliometricians have turned their mighty tools of analysis to Cuban slavery, and, like their efforts elsewhere, the results are exciting, provocative, but ultimately somewhat disappointing. We now know more about Cuban slavery during its last century of existence than we ever did before. Unfortunately, we do not know enough nor can we always make good sense out of the information generated. In fairness to Laird W. Bergad of CUNY, Fe Iglesias Garcia, and Maria del Carmen Barcia (the latter two from the History Institute of Cuba in Havana), the three authors realize better than anyone else the limitations of their data.

Perhaps no labor system in the West has more information available on its internal dynamics than does slavery. This is because governments were always involved in its operation at various levels. Bergad, Iglesias Garcia, and Barcia turned loose a team of student researchers on the rich notary and protocol documents housed in the National Archives of Cuba. Notaries recorded almost all slave trade transactions in Cuba because the state diligently taxed (the *alcabala*) this business. Ultimately, this Cuban-American research team extracted information from 23,022 slave purchases in three regions: Havana, Santiago, and Cienfuegos. In all cases, the notary records yielded information on slave price, gender, and national origin (whether foreign or domestic born). In many cases, the notaries also recorded information on age, profession, health, marital status, African ethnic

identity, skin color, and type of sale. For a variety of reasons, the authors concluded that these notarial records contain accurate information, especially in the crucial area of purchase price.

From this data, the authors have been able to fashion a price history for the Cuban slave market during the height of sugar plantation growth in the nineteenth century. This alone is an extraordinarily valuable contribution, and the field of Cuban history is much indebted to these three authors for their labor here. With this new information, the authors have compared the Cuban time-price trends with those in Brazil and the United States, two sister slave societies in the New World. For much of the period covered, the Cuban data followed a roughly similar pattern to neighboring slave societies. The trio of authors also presented a fascinating chapter on the institution of *coartacion* in Cuba. *Coartacion* slaves were individuals who had begun the process of purchasing their own freedom. These slaves had a unique legal position in nineteenth-century Cuba. Once a down payment on freedom had been made, the value of the slave was fixed and could not be altered. Among other privileges, *coartacion* slaves had the right to find new masters and to collect a percentage of their earnings if hired out. An amazing 13 percent of the slave sales examined in this book were *coartacion* purchases. Seeking freedom certainly did not diminish the attractiveness of these slaves to buyers.

Ultimately, historians must interpret data, and it is here that the cliometricians must stick their collective

necks out. Because of the massive amount of materials that must be examined, they seldom operate alone, and there may be a sense of collective security from critics. Bergad, Iglesias Garcia, and Barcia produce numbers to show that there were suggestive regional variations in the Cuban slave trade. The business of buying and selling chattel in Havana was different than that in Cienfuegos and Santiago. They demonstrate that Cuba had a substantial urban slave trade totaling as much as a quarter of all slaves sold. There were puzzling gender variations in prices, with female slaves frequently being more valuable than male. This gender fluctuation often occurred during times when the continuation of the slave trade seemed threatened, and the authors unhesitatingly attribute this to the Cuban market's putting an increased value on the reproductive potential of female slaves. Paradoxically, the tri-metricians present no evidence that Cuban society ever attempted to rely on natural population increase to supply its slave labor needs. More paradoxically, an overwhelming percentage of coartacion slaves were female, just the gender (if reproduction was a valued characteristic) that a worried slave society would want to keep in bondage.

What is missing in the interpretation of this data is Africa. Surely everything that makes sense out of price fluctuation could not have been domestic demand alone. The supply side must have played some role also. The African influence on slave prices could have been more than mere numbers. For example, since women

performed the planting and harvesting work in many African societies, it is possible that their value in Cuba was higher in troubled times because they could be counted on to do more productive labor than males. Here is one of those occasions where traditional historical evidence such as travel accounts and diaries are needed to make sense out of numbers. To take this point further, the African base must have played an active role in shaping the supply available for purchase in Cuba in terms of gender, ethnic origin, age, and health. The time-price data for Cuba needs to be examined in light of the major political and social events taking place in the slave-producing areas of Africa.

While *The Cuban Slave Market* is far from a flawless effort, it is a most welcomed work. There will be no serious study of nineteenth-century Cuba and Latin American slavery for a long time to come that will not refer to this book. Almost as exciting as the data and conclusions in the book was the research team that this Cuban-American venture was able to put together. It will be interesting to see if other joint efforts emerge in the future. In the meantime, almost all Latin Americanists will want this book in their library.

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Citation: James A. Lewis. Review of Bergad, Laird W.; Garcia, Fe Iglesias; Barcia, Maria del Carmen, *The Cuban Slave Market, 1790-1880*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. October, 1996.

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