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The Atlantic slave trade, the largest demographic shift in world history, forced over ten million men, women, and children from one continent to another; nearly half of these individuals went to Brazil. Today Brazil is home to the largest African-descended population in the Americas, which includes over fifty-five million people. After the United States and Cuba, Brazil in 1888 became the last nation in the hemisphere to abolish the institution of slavery. In 2015, Brazilian sociologist Angela Alonso published a comprehensive account of the politics of Brazil's abolitionist movement during the two decades preceding the formal end of slavery, *Flores, Votos e Balas: O Movimento Abolicionista Brasileiro (1868–88)*, which garnered two of Brazil's most prestigious book awards. Cambridge University Press has recently published an English translation of Alonso's prize-winning book, retitled *The Last Abolition: The Brazilian Antislavery Movement, 1868-1888*.

Alonso's rigorously researched study approaches Brazil's abolitionism as a form of contentious politics embedded in a broader history of social movements. She situates Brazil's struggle to end slavery in an international context as she examines the structural aspects of social movement formation associated with Charles Tilly's work in historical and political sociology. As Alonso explains in her introduction, movements form during political crisis, when the coalition in command of the state divides, producing dissident elites that seek alliances within society. Intra-elite division reduces the state's capacity to repress protest, opening opportunities for politically underrepresented groups to express their claims in the public space (p. 16).

Alonso proceeds to document the dynamics of movement/state/countermovement in Brazil between 1868 and 1888 by focusing on shifting balances of power, modes of activism, and political brokers who carve out spaces for mobilization. The chapters center on these political brokers, and Alonso skillfully incorporates details and research from newspapers, letters, speeches, and parliamentary records (among many other sources) to give the reader a vivid experience.

Among the most important leaders of the movement Alonso documents are Andre Rebouças, José do Patrocínio, and Luís Gama. All three identified as African-descended (unlike some of the proslavery reactionaries who never acknowledged their possible African ancestry). Gama was a lawyer, himself formerly enslaved (and the son of a formerly enslaved African-born woman who played a central role in the 1835 Malê revolt that was possibly the largest urban slave revolt in the Americas). Gama facilitated a large number of freedom suits that Alonso described as
Gama-style activism, a juridical approach “stretching interpretations of legal slavery to their elastic limit” (p. 101). He collaborated with José do Patrocínio, a pharmacist-turned-influential journalist and grassroots political mobilizer who coordinated a variety of abolitionist strategies in public space. Andre Rebouças was an engineer, professor, and businessman as well as an exceedingly adept lobbyist, coalition builder, aristocratic insider, and “unsung hero” (p. 359) whose constant, behind-the-scenes work was essential to the movement.

All three men experienced racial discrimination, and in the case of Patrocínio and Gama, limited material resources, yet all three successfully navigated social and political networks and had an outsized impact on the movement that realized the end of institutional slavery in Brazil. Alonso literally maps the multitude of abolitionist demonstrations and organizations that formed between 1868 and 1888, yet this study of social movements often centers on parliamentary politics and elite actors.

Among the most interesting aspects of Alonso's transnational framing is her assertion that the kinds of racial and religious arguments that took center stage in US and European abolitionism had little truck in Brazil’s political and cultural climate. While Alonso documents the connections between Brazilian abolitionists and British and American antislavery organizations (as well as with abolitionist organizations in Spain and France), she asserts that in Brazil, the arts took up the role of religion in creating a discourse and sites for abolitionist mobilization. In the original Portuguese title of this book, Flowers, Votes, and Bullets, “flowers” refers to the blossoms that theater goers threw after concerts, plays and operas, public events that were designed as de facto abolitionist conferences. “Votes” points to the political machinations, realpolitik, and electoral politics that shaped the movement. And finally, “bullets” represent both the violent legal and extralegal repression enforced by the counter movement after the 1884 election put conservatives in power as well as the abolitionist call for civil disobedience in its wake. When the army aligned with the abolitionists in 1887, various elite factions came to consensus, including the Catholic Church, the Crown, and the Conservative party, and slavery was abolished in 1888.

In the late nineteenth century, Brazil’s proslavery advocates, according to Alonso, did not have a well-articulated rationale. They did, however, generate a robust counter movement, establishing, for example, the Commercial and Plantation Club to combat the Free Womb Law. Resistance to the free womb laws that engendered a partial, gradual, and very imperfect abolition in the Spanish Americas (and which passed in Brazil in 1871 and splintered the conservative faction) was couched in fears of social upheaval and economic breakdown, not racial superiority. “Racialization, a cornerstone of the US slave system, was mitigated in Brazil,” Alonso writes (p. 58). She goes on to argue that in a society based on class hierarchy like Brazil “no racial angle was really required … even if one was nonetheless ingrained” (p. 58). Whereas historians of the United States can point to a variety of manifestos of white supremacy as an ideology intended to rationalize slavery (epitomized by Alexander Stephens's 1861 “Cornerstone Speech”), Brazil's proslavery faction recognized that slavery was an institution incompatible with modernization. Despite the ignominy of being the last nation to maintain slavery, these proslavery aristocrats sought to prolong its denouement because they knew that enslaved Brazilians “were the Atlases on whose shoulders rested the world” (p. 53), and that every aspect of their economic and social luxury was made possible by the work of the enslaved. Anti-Blackness manifested in Brazil not in denigrating legislation targeting African descendants like the US's infamous Black Codes but rather, as Alonso argues, in cultural erasure. She points to operas in the wake of abolition that performed origin stories center-
ing Brazil’s European and Native American history and severing the African branches and roots of the nation’s founding. Public and literary narratives downplayed the abolitionist movement, omitted the formerly enslaved, and excised Africans from Brazil’s “foundation myth [and] imagined community” (p. 351).

Alonso succeeds in making her case that the history of Brazil’s abolitionist movement is inextricable from the larger, global history of modern social movements. She illuminates how Brazilians built polycentric national networks of associations, established alliances with and sought political pressure from transnational abolitionist networks, and adapted and generated novel, portable strategies of mobilization in the face of specific local and political circumstances. In addition to the book’s eleven chapters in which Alonso details the relational dynamics and trajectory of the movement over the course of two decades, her annex includes a detailed chronology spanning from 1823 to 1888, as well as tables and timelines naming hundreds of specific associations and demonstrations. Alonso’s painstaking work completely obliterates the notion that Brazilian “abolition was the handiwork of the Crown” (p. 360), a mythology cultivated in the wake of abolition in part by key players like Rebouças and Patrocínio whose public statements helped transform Brazil’s last emperor, Dom Pedro II, into the “patriarch of the abolitionist family” (p. 349).

In her framing of abolition as Brazil’s first social movement, Alonso centers Black political actors like Rebouças, Patrocínio, and Gama along with white Brazilians like Abílio Borges, Antônio Bento, and Joaquim Nabuco (of whom Alonso has written a biography) as protagonists in the story of Brazilian abolition, even as they themselves sometimes publicly deflected that narrative. Her focus on local and international social networks, public ritual, state power, and civic associations reflects the larger themes of comparative historical sociology. For an almost play-by-play examination of the political antagonism and strategies of the leaders who shaped Brazil’s national movement and the counter movement, action and reaction in changing political circumstances, Alonso’s book is the landmark study connecting political-institutional dynamics to public mobilization. As Alonso recognizes, the ending of slavery in Brazil was complex, and a wealth of scholarship examines the multifaceted processes that shaped it. Celso Thomas Castilho’s 2016 Slave Emancipation and Transformations in Brazilian Citizenship builds upon Alonso’s work in many regards, covering the same time frame, as it brings attention to the abolitionist work of enslaved Brazilians. Camillia Cowling’s 2016 book Conceiving Freedom centers the ways in which enslaved women’s court petitions in Rio de Janeiro and Havana initiated paths to freedom and shaped the trajectory of abolitionism. The breadth of scholarship in Brodwyn Fischer and Keila Grinberg’s 2022 edited volume, The Boundaries of Freedom: Slavery, Abolition, and the Making of Modern Brazil, frames Brazilian abolition as a century long process that involved a broad range of contributors. Despite various approaches to the subject, all of these scholars would agree with Alonso that “the end of slavery was a watershed in Brazilian history, but its aftershocks are still felt in the country’s current forms of inequality” (p. 23).
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