

Book Review

– *Crossroads of freedom: slaves and freed people in Bahia, Brazil, 1870-1910*, by Walter Fraga. Translated by Mary Ann Mahony. Duke University Press, 2016.

The translation of *Encruzilhadas da Liberdade* into English has every reason to be well received by the Anglophone academy. Walter Fraga's book is undoubtedly one of the most important results of Brazilian social history that has been produced in the past 15 years. The book was even recognized by the American Historical Association with a Clarence H. Haring Prize (2006-2011) for best work in Latin American history. The English edition released by Duke University Press represents an excellent opportunity to deepen dialogue between Brazilian historiography of slavery and post-abolition and scholars working on parallel issues in other parts of the Americas.

Crossroads of Freedom has a very clear objective, announced in its first pages: to examine the trajectories of enslaved and freed people in the Bahian Recôncavo between the two decades prior to the abolition of Brazilian slavery (on May 13, 1888) and the two decades that ensued. The book proposes to evaluate 'the implications of abolition and the consequences of the end of slavery for a significant sector of Brazil's black population' (p. 1). Toward this end, in addition to dialoguing with historiographies and anthropologies of freedom in other parts of the Americas (Sidney Mintz, Eric Foner, Leon Litwack, Rebecca Scott, Dale Tomich, and Mary Turner), Fraga turns to the core method of microhistory, privileging the cross-referencing of diverse documents (baptismal records, birth and death certificates, postmortem inventories, private correspondence, and accounting books) in search of concrete experiences of those historical agents under consideration.

Although Fraga avoids hackneyed idioms of "continuity" and "rupture" between slavery and post-abolition, the book can be divided into two parts. The first three chapters analyze the crisis of Brazilian slavery in the sugar mills of the Bahian Recôncavo. This part shows how, from a specific reading of that reality, enslaved people were able to further bend the slave regime and contribute significantly to its downfall. The last six chapters examine the conflicts between freed people and former masters about rights and material resources in the post-abolition era.

These methodological decisions enable Fraga to corroborate several conclusions of Brazilian historiography of abolition, showing how the approval of the Law of the Free Womb (1871), together with the abolitionists' campaign, expanded possibilities of resistance, both for slaves in the Recôncavo as for those in the rest of Brazil. Fraga convincingly demonstrates how freed people took advantage of abolition in an effort to create work regimes that more closely aligned with their conceptions of freedom – refusal of daily rations, maintenance of garden plots (*roças*), demands for wages, the institution of new work rhythms, and so forth. Far from idealizing the achievements of the period, the book still highlights the difficulties faced by former slaves in their quest for a life that was more consistent with their aspirations for freedom, showing how, after 1888, they had to cope with intensified police repression and state control over many of their activities.

As becomes evident, the method of 'history from below' employed in *Crossroads of Freedom* was fundamental for advancing scholarly understanding of post-emancipation Brazil – undoubtedly the greatest contribution of Fraga's work. Still, it is possible to offer criticisms of the book's framework. Focusing his analysis on slaves and freed people, Fraga pays less attention to the broader historical situation of enslaved and freed people's agency. While Fraga provides a wider framework for the economic sphere, where he describes elements of the sugar crisis and its impact on the contest between freed people and former masters after 1888, the book has some shortcomings with respect to Brazil's macropolitical situation.

The most notable case concerns the disparity between the treatment Fraga gives to elements informing the crisis of abolition and those informing Brazil's post-emancipation society. In the first, Fraga proceeds from the premise that in order to understand 'tensions on the plantations' throughout the 1870s and 1880s one must take into account the consequences of the 1871 Law of the Free Womb, through which 'the Brazilian imperial government signalled that slavery would eventually end' (p. 21-22). Nonetheless, the relation between macropolitics and the agency of slaves – a relationship broadly recognized as important in abolition historiography – is largely ignored in the second part of the book, where the experiences of freed people come into focus. Only in the epilogue does Fraga mention the existence of Brazil's new republican government, implying that the change of political regime served to intensify police control over urban black workers. In the final chapters preceding the epilogue, however, this macropolitical framework remains largely latent if not ignored, as if it had had no bearing upon the fate of the freed people after 1889.

Another case where the absence of a broader framework proves to be problematic is in chapter two. In describing problems of work discipline faced by the administrator of the Carmo Plantation, Fraga concludes that slaves' struggles during the 1880s acquired a new meaning, becoming '“antisystemic” rather than accepting of the established rules' (p. 53). Certainly the claim is not without meaning, as few would doubt the transformations that slave resistance

underwent during the final decade of the slavery. Although clearly referring to the slave system, the reader however does not know how Fraga characterizes the 'system' that gives slaves' 'antisystemic' struggles their meaning. Considering that in the rest of the book Fraga seems to dispense with the notion of 'system', this is a point that stands out.

None of these points, however, diminish the conclusions of *Crossroads of Freedom*, which offers all the necessary ingredients to achieve the same success among the Anglophone academy as it did among Brazilian historians. One wonders if it may encourage a new generation of Brazilianist scholars to study the crises of slavery and post-abolition, expansive themes that harbor many lacunae awaiting research of the same quality and rigor as Fraga's.

Alain El Youssef, University of São Paulo
alain@usp.br