

RECENT LITERATURE ON LATIN AMERICAN SLAVERY

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SLAVERY AND ABOLITION IN EARLY REPUBLICAN PERU. By Peter Blanchard. (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1992. Pp. 247. \$40.00 cloth, \$15.95 paper.)

SLAVE WOMEN IN CARIBBEAN SOCIETY, 1650–1838. By Barbara Bush. (Kingston: Heineman, 1990. Pp. 190. \$29.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper.)

THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE: EFFECTS ON ECONOMICS, SOCIETY, AND PEOPLES IN AFRICA, THE AMERICAS, AND EUROPE. Edited by Joseph E. Inikori and Stanley L. Engerman. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992. Pp. 412. \$45.00 cloth, \$17.95 paper.)

ANTROPOLOGIA DE LA ESCLAVITUD. By Claude Meillassoux. (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1990. Pp. 425.)

SLAVES, SUGAR, AND COLONIAL SOCIETY: TRAVEL ACCOUNTS OF CUBA. By Louis A. Pérez, Jr. (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1992. Pp. 259. \$40.00 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)

SLAVERY AND THE RISE OF THE ATLANTIC SYSTEM. Edited by Barbara L. Solow. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Pp. 355. \$39.50 cloth.)

AFRICA AND AFRICANS IN THE MAKING OF THE ATLANTIC WORLD, 1400–1680. By John Thornton. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Pp. 309. \$49.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper.)

In the past few years, studies of black slavery in Latin America have followed the same general direction of works written on the subject since World War II.¹ The first such studies sought to describe the institution and often repudiated it. More recent investigations have sought to probe the operational dynamics of slavery in different temporal and spatial contexts and in some cases to attach contemporary relevance to their findings. This emphasis on dynamics, context, and relevance underscores the organic nature of recent examinations of slavery. Researchers employ-

1. Latin America is defined here as the Caribbean Islands and areas of Mesoamerica and South America that were colonies of Spain and Portugal at the outset of the nineteenth century. This review essay focuses on black slavery as defined by law in Latin America, ignoring the institution of Amerindian bondage that also existed in the region.

ing this focus have thus posed new questions about slavery as it existed in the Mediterranean, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Americas at different points in time. This review essay will examine seven recent studies of black slavery in the Western Hemisphere and discuss some of the common questions they raise. Did variance in American slave societies arise out of differences in culture transferred from the Old World? For that matter, did outside Atlantic forces or local forces dominate the development and operation of particular Latin American slaveocracies? Did differing modes of production, regardless of their origin, yield varying slave dynamics and contexts, or did other environmental, demographic, or even social conditions weigh more heavily in shaping slaveocracies? Finally, who were the winners and who were the losers in the practice of slavery?

Herbert Klein, one of the early pioneers of the comparative perspective on slavery in the Americas, more recently adopted a theoretical approach that is basically Marxist. In *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Klein argued that a sugar culture evolved in the Atlantic Basin that grew to dominate the black Latin American experience.² This culture revolved around the commercial cultivation of sugar and to a lesser degree around commercial mining. In Klein's view, the role played by groups (including black slaves) in producing sugar and mining precious metals and stones for export functioned as the primary factor shaping their lives. Klein believes that these common relationships to production (meaning the shared status as slaves) generated more similarities than dissimilarities in the Afro-Latin American experience.³ His conclusion bears on a related question about the degree of regional distinctiveness of slavery in that his findings suggest little local variance in the experiences of slaves of African origin throughout Latin America.

Klein's application of Marxist theory is problematic, however, in that it glosses over several contradictions, especially the reality that slave labor does not fit well into Marx's theory of class conflict. Claude Meillassoux, a Marxist anthropologist, has attempted to reconcile this inconsistency. In *Antropología de la esclavitud* (a Spanish translation of the original work in French),⁴ Meillassoux points out that Marx divided slavery into two categories. "Patriarchal bondage" was the older of the two forms of slavery he identified. According to Marx, this form of coerced labor derived from accidents of fate such as capture in battle and thus resulted from random misfortune rather than from group identification by characteristics such as race, ethnicity, or economic class.⁵ Moreover, patriarchal

2. Herbert Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 14.

3. *Ibid.*, 18, 20, 66.

4. See Claude Meillassoux, *Anthropologie de l'esclavage* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988).

5. Race is defined here as inherited identifying characteristics like skin color, hair texture,

slaves produced for their own subsistence as well as for their masters (p. 20). Taken in toto, patriarchal slavery was a relatively benevolent and personalized form of coerced labor more like European serfdom than like American slavery. According to Meillassoux, patriarchalism implied social rather than economic criteria for determining power and as such did not lend itself to Marxist theory based on class conflict. Appropriating a person's labor for communal subsistence (including that of the slave) did not constitute a level of exploitation equal to that suffered by African blacks and their descendants in the Americas after European contact (p. 21).

Marx labeled his second category "commercial capitalist slavery." In this system, enslavement resulted from identifying a specific group for enslavement rather than randomly selecting individuals. Slavery was not caused and maintained by chance or misfortune but by economic exigency. Under commercial capitalistic slavery, those in bondage produced a surplus for commercial purposes rather than for mere subsistence, and their station in life consequently derived from their relationship to the means and mode of production for the marketplace (pp. 21–23). Meillassoux considers this definition to approximate black slavery as it developed in the Americas.

Perhaps the most important contribution of *Antropología de la esclavitud* is Meillassoux's explanation of events leading to the development and spread of capitalist slavery. He explains that around 900 A.D., three North African sectors—Moslem aristocrats, military leaders, and merchants—united to transform African paternalistic slavery into commercial capitalist slavery. North Africans then transferred this practice to the sub-Saharan region. Warfare served as the means for producing slaves, and trade became the vehicle for exchanging them in the labor market (pp. 49, 351, 353–55). Five hundred years later, European contact with the New World led to extreme demographic and economic conditions that encouraged transferring African-based commercial capitalist slavery to Latin America (p. 356).

Meillassoux's explanation, based on interdisciplinary historical and anthropological theory and methodology, offers a reasonable link between Marxist logic and the rise of slavery in Latin America. It also allows for broader application than Klein's "sugar culture" thesis for the rise and maintenance of the institution. At the same time, Meillassoux's approach places both slavery and the Americas within the structural context of the broader Atlantic commercial system. These advantages make *Antropología de la esclavitud* a welcome addition to the growing body of literature dealing with the context and dynamics of slavery.

and facial characteristics (phenotype) that were perceived and generally agreed on by members of racially pluralistic societies. Ethnicity is defined as acquired characteristics such as language, religion, and behavioral norms that were perceived and generally recognized by members of ethnically pluralistic societies.

A structuralist approach to history, regardless of its theoretical basis, involves a number of inherent limitations. For one thing, structuralism sacrifices depth for breadth of focus. It reveals less about individuals and small groups but more about nations and large populations, less about particular themes but more about overall human experience. In many ways, however, studies of slavery since 1990 have reduced these limitations.

Emphasis on a single institution and division of those related to it into groups defined either by their economic roles in slaveocracies or by various definitions of “otherness,” such as race or ethnicity, offer a better balance between broadly and moderately focused studies of historical human behavior. This point is illustrated by a number of interpretations in the volumes edited by Barbara Solow and by Joseph Inikori and Stanley Engerman.

In the lead essay of *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System*, editor Solow proposes that forces transcending broad conditions in the Atlantic Basin shaped the economic development of the New World. She argues that capitalism could not rely on wage labor (a proletariat) in certain areas of the Americas that offered an abundance of land but little labor. In such settings, workers either sold their labor too dearly to generate sufficient profits to support commercial capitalism, or they acquired land so cheaply that they created too much competition for large commercial productive units to survive. Under these circumstances, forced labor became a logical alternative to wage labor. In the absence of enough coercible, culturally compatible indigenous peoples or immigrant laborers, European capitalists opted for a logical alternative to paid workers—imported African slaves.

One contributor to Solow’s work, Franklin Knight, supports the preeminence of Atlantic Basin influences in directing Latin American development and slavery’s role in it. Knight concludes that black slavery played a critical role in forging economic linkages between the Old World and the New. In Knight’s judgment, the rise of imperialistic commercial capitalism in the Atlantic Basin would never have taken place on such a scale from the sixteenth century to the twentieth without the existence of black slavery and the economic activities associated with it (pp. 62, 69). The slave trade and the labor of black Ibero-American slaves and later non-Ibero-American ones helped generate the capital, goods, and markets that dominated Atlantic trade for nearly five hundred years. Slaves had such an impact because they were one of the main items of exchange that Old World merchants traded for American products. In the Americas, they were also “units” of labor producing many coveted New World commodities (pp. 65–66). Finally, slaves as consumers created demand for European and African commodities. As Knight observes, “Without African slaves and the transatlantic slave trade, the potential economic

value of the Americas could never have been realized . . ." (p. 72). It took the transformation of Northern Europe from a system of commercial capitalism to one of industrial capitalism after the French Revolution to eclipse the pivotal role of black slavery in the Atlantic economy (p. 74).

Joseph Miller, another contributor to the Solow collection, also supports the idea of Atlantic hegemony outweighing local forces in shaping African development (and that of Latin America by inference). Unlike Solow and Knight, however, Miller thinks that the role of the slave trade in this process has been overstated. He finds the real significance of the Atlantic slave trade to be its marginality rather than its centrality to the main currents of the Old World–New World exchange of commodities and services (pp. 121–22). In Miller's view, the relatively low volume of the slave trade in comparison with other commodities of exchange facilitated its duration and comprehensiveness. Moreover, because of the unimportance of slavery, Portugal offered little resistance to participation by other nations in the trade. Yet once in effect, non-Iberian involvement in the slave trade insured the spread of slavery throughout colonial America. Internationalization of slave commerce guaranteed a supply of Africans for all American markets at all times. This consideration proved particularly important in Spanish and Portuguese America because by the mid-seventeenth century, these countries' navies had been eclipsed by England and the Low Countries (pp. 149–50).

Luiz Felipe de Alencastro's essay in the Solow collection also asserts the predominance of Atlantic influence over local forces in shaping Latin American societies, but he establishes a middle ground between Miller's position and that of Solow and Knight on the importance of slavery in the process. Spanish and Portuguese America represented the two largest markets for African slaves. The Portuguese Empire served as the principal exporter to the Americas. In analyzing black slavery within the Ibero imperial systems, Alencastro somewhat supports Miller's position in describing the commercial and political frailty of the Spanish-American and Portuguese-American commercial systems. At the same time, he reinforces Solow's and Knight's stances in concluding that because neither Spain nor Portugal had the political power to bind its African and American possessions to its colonial empire, both relied heavily on economic links. In Alencastro's opinion, the Iberian nations used slavery primarily as an economic tool for maintaining imperial ties. Commerce in slaves provided a product of exchange between the metropolis and American possessions as well as a source of considerable tax revenue for the mother countries. The slave trade also created an efficient labor force in many "central areas" that lacked cheap alternative labor forces, as Solow argues (p. 23).⁶

6. I am borrowing the term *central areas* from James Lockhart and Stuart Schwartz, *Early*

Alencastro diverges from Solow's Marxist-based interpretation in that he views land and labor not as "independent factors but . . . variables that are the result of forces ruling commercial capitalism" (p. 176). Put another way, Alencastro concludes that slavery (especially in Brazil) did not arise out of Brazilian labor conditions or, as scholars like Solow might argue, out of an abundance of land that made coercion of labor necessary to achieve large-scale commercial production in agriculture (sugar) and mining (gold and diamonds). Alencastro posits instead that imperial sponsorship of the Atlantic slave trade dictated the transfer of African commercial slavery to Ibero-America (p. 176). Implicit in this conclusion is the assumption that Old World influences proved to be the primary factors leading to the establishment of African slavery in Latin America and that these influences were dictated less by slaves' relationship to production than by the imperial objectives of Spain and Portugal.

The Atlantic Slave Trade: Effects on Economics, Society, and Peoples in Africa, the Americas, and Europe, co-edited by Joseph Inikori and Stanley Engerman, offers an array of structuralist approaches to slavery ranging in theoretical orientation from Marxism to capitalism. These essays share a common theme, however, in asking the question, "Who were the gainers and who were the losers in slavery?" Although none of the contributions deal exclusively with Latin America, a few provide worthwhile insights into the general dynamics and overall context of black slavery in the western half of the globe.

The opening essay by Inikori and Engerman presents a good overview of the literature on who did and did not profit from slavery in Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Martin Klein follows with a narrower but meatier assessment of winners and losers in the Western Sudan from the fifteenth century through the eighteenth. Klein finds that for Africans, the slave trade held far more negative than positive effects in that it reshaped the basic social and political fabric of Sudanese societies by facilitating the ascendancy of an exploitive native African trinity of aristocrats, warriors, and merchants.

Aristocrats provided the political support for slavery because slaves became loyal warriors who were not kin. Merchants provided the capital and marketing services necessary to empower aristocrats and provision their warrior slaves with commodities (especially horses and modern weapons) (pp. 28–29). The dependence of slave warriors on aristocrats and merchants ironically led them to support the very system that enslaved them. Finally, Islamic religion provided justification for the entire undertaking.

Latin America: A History of Colonial Spanish America and Brazil (London: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 86. These areas represented centers of material or human resources that provided the greatest volume of products and demand for Atlantic commerce within the Ibero-American empires at varying points in time. They included Mexico and Peru and later Brazil, New Granada, and Cuba.

Moslems opposed the enslavement of Moslems, a stance that offered a pretext for first rebelling against non-Moslem peoples who enslaved believers and then for enslaving these former oppressors because they had violated Islamic law. After consolidating their domestic power, Moslems extended this logic to justify making war on neighboring infidels in order to procure new slave warriors for aristocrats, new sources of goods for merchants, and new converts for Allah. Once they had established this system, the Sudanese rulers depended on slavery to sustain their political and economic existence (pp. 36–37).

Such a dynamic transformed the Sudanese state from a protector into an oppressor of its own population. The state assumed its dominating role for political reasons (warfare) or at other times for economic reasons (trade and control of labor). But according to Inikori and Engerman, the primary motive was always to advance the interests of aristocrats, merchants, and warrior slaves (pp. 27–28, 40–41).

Several other pieces in *The Atlantic Slave Trade* add to general knowledge of commerce in slaves and its long-term influence on Africans and Afro-Americans. Miller provides insightful analysis of the eighteenth-century Angolan slave trade. He reconstructs both legal and contraband networks, taking into consideration the quality of the documentary evidence, French, English, Portuguese, and Brazilian machinations, and inter-African political and economic conditions. Miller concludes that the Portuguese who nominally controlled the trade were in fact powerless to direct it (p. 89). His findings suggest that many slaves presumed to have come from West Africa (the Kwanza and Kwasanje river basins) actually came from West Central Africa (river regions adjacent to Luanda) through the port of Benguela (pp. 79–81, 110).

The implications of Miller's analysis match those of his essay in the Solow volume: the African slave trade was much less structured than many have believed, and this flexibility added to its resilience but also to its limited importance within the larger context of Atlantic commercial development. Thus the circumference of the winners' circle comprising African and European merchants, along with users of slave labor in the Americas, proved smaller than anticipated by scholars such as Knight and Solow.

Patrick Manning, another contributor to the Inikori and Engerman collection, employs an interdisciplinary approach to identify indirectly winners and losers among populations affected by Atlantic-based slavery and also to place slavery within a broader spatial and operational context. He presents a model for estimating the demographic impact of slavery on Africa. His model defines the slave trade as a single demographic system that connected Africa, the Americas, the Middle East, and the Far East. Manning describes the New World demand for slaves from 1700 to 1850 as the engine driving and propelling a system that linked five continents (pp. 118–19).

Manning's model divides Africans and their descendants into five-

year age cohorts that he calls “variables.” He then measures shifting rates of what he terms “parameters of change” for these age-specific variables: his chosen parameters are rates of fertility, mortality, and migration. By correlating fluctuations in these parameters with changes in the age structure of populations, Manning provides dates for demographic stresses related to the enslavement of Africans (p. 122).

From his marriage of historical and demographic methodologies, Manning draws several conclusions. He estimates that between 1500 and 1890, twelve million slaves left Africa for the New World. One and a half million of these forced migrants died while crossing the Atlantic. Another six million slaves were marched overland to the Middle East. Yet another eight million spent their lives serving masters in Africa. Finally, four million Africans lost their lives while serving their masters in all of these regions combined (pp. 119–20). In Manning’s view, the sheer magnitude of these numbers irrevocably defines Africa as the major loser in the dynamics of slavery. The diaspora caused the sub-Saharan population from Senegal to Angola to decline “significantly” between 1730 and 1850 and the population of the continent as a whole to stagnate.

Yet the slave trade accounted directly for only part of Africa’s demographic stress. Indirect effects also came into play. For example, uneven sex ratios created by the trade led to inverse gender imbalances in African and New World slave communities. The fact that males often accounted for an estimated two-thirds of the exported slaves created a shortage of men in African supply sites and a shortage of women in slave markets in the Americas. According to Manning, this gender imbalance contributed to social and political unrest on both sides of the Atlantic. Nearly five centuries of African arrivals contributed one-seventh of the gene pool to the New World populations that accepted slaves. These gains made Latin America an enormous winner and Africa an enormous loser in this exchange of human resources (pp. 120–21).

Collective works like those edited by Solow and by Inikori and Engerman along with broad overviews like that of Meillassoux contribute to an enhanced broad perspective on slavery in Latin America. At the same time, monographs employing a regionally based structuralist perspective may contribute even more to general understanding of the institution’s changing dynamics and context. John Thornton has applied a monographic format to a popular genre of structuralist history in *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1680*. The resulting study exemplifies the utility of such an approach.

The specific type of structuralism Thornton selected comes from the French Annales school, whose scholars blend historians’ well-developed archival strategies and sensitivity to the quality of sources with innovative theoretical constructs of anthropologists. This interdisciplinary strategy has increasingly influenced students of slavery in the past ten years and

has generated broad structural analysis of shifting and interlocking economic, social, and political patterns. Investigators employing this philosophy of history seek short, middle-, and long-range “rhythms” in the historical patterns they uncover. They then look for junctures at which these patterns overlap by narrowing their focus to a specific theme—occasionally the institution of slavery. Thornton, an Africanist, employs this paradigm to determine the dynamics of slavery operating on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the first half of *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World*, Thornton focuses on the African origins of the institution. In the second half, he treats the experiences of slaves in the Americas. Thornton does a good job of placing these African and American slave settings within the Atlantic political economy from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries. Drawing on information from an array of primary and secondary sources, Thornton arrives at several conclusions that reflect the main thrust of contemporary slave studies. He also provides an impressive analysis of the rise, operation, and maintenance of slavery in West Africa.

Thornton’s explanations of slaves’ lives in the New World are unfortunately narrower and less penetrating than his interpretation of African events. In the American setting, he treats only three dimensions of slave life—slave labor, slave culture (especially religion), and slave resistance. His findings indicate that Africans, whether free in Africa or enslaved in America, played a more active than passive role in defining their own lives and the ways in which slavery operated (p. 42). Thornton demonstrates convincingly that Africans did not depend on Atlantic trade items. More than Europeans, they controlled the volume and scope of Africa’s participation in international commerce, including the exchange of slaves (see chapters 2 and 4). He also concludes that Africans, not Europeans, determined the amount of foreign culture that Africans adopted (pp. 183–92).

Thornton draws similar conclusions about the proactiveness of Afro-American slaves. He contends that they, not whites or Indians, dictated the levels of black slaves’ interaction with other groups (pp. 129–30). Unfortunately, the evidence he presents in support of his conclusions on the New World is weaker and less comprehensive than that he marshals to buttress his findings on Africa.

Implicit in Thornton’s conclusions is the suggestion that the Atlantic economy and European metropolises exercised less influence over “peripheral areas” like Latin America and Africa than proponents of “world systems” have thought. Thornton’s argument represents a common position taken by those who advocate a regional perspective over one focusing on the Atlantic system for studying slavery or other related colonial New World themes.⁷

7. Steve Stern, “Feudalism, Capitalism, and the World System in the Perspective of Latin America and the Caribbean,” *American Historical Review* 93, no. 4 (Oct. 1988):829–72.

Scholars who focus on the broader Atlantic system differ among themselves over the role played by slavery within that commercial capitalistic order. Those concentrating primarily on Latin American or African regional locales agree almost uniformly on the primacy of local influences in establishing black slavery in the New World. This consensus has four implications. First, the experiences of individual slave communities were more place-specific than previously thought. Second, spatial specificity suggests far more variation in the Afro-American experience than has been presumed by many, including Herbert Klein, Barbara Solow, and Claude Meillassoux. Third, Afro-Americans probably played a more active role in creating their New World realities than most scholars have imagined. Finally, the margin of difference between African and American losers and white European and American winners in slavery may have been narrower than previously thought.

Peter Blanchard's *Slavery and Abolition in Early Republican Peru* represents an even more narrowly focused monographic study whose depth of analysis exceeds that exhibited in Thornton's intercontinental study. From his careful and well-documented tracing of the gradual move toward abolition in Peru, Blanchard draws a significant observation that transcends the study of slavery in Latin America. He concludes that the institution's endurance for three decades beyond independence coupled with the persistence of racism against black Peruvians underscore the continuity in Peruvian and Latin American life, despite constant change. Blanchard argues that this continuity remains a fundamental dimension of the Latin American human condition (pp. xv–xvi, 218–21). One might carry Blanchard's conclusion even further: the gradualism of Peruvian abolition amid political and economic upheaval highlights the compatibility of change and continuity in the overall human experience, an important theme in contemporary historiography.⁸

As enlightening as the recent literature on the dynamics and context of the slave experience is, it suffers from at least one serious limitation. It can only infer the human experiences within slaveocracies. Groups belonging to slave societies—slave traders, planters, estate managers, miners, slaves, and freedmen and freedwomen—left uneven amounts of often biased testimony on the human questions surrounding this “peculiar institution.” Filling a bit of this gap is Louis Pérez's edited volume of accounts by travelers to nineteenth-century Cuba. *Slaves, Sugar, and Colonial Society: Travel Accounts of Cuba* sheds some light on certain groups that made up one Latin American slave society at a particular point in time. Pérez chose to record the comments of travelers to the island coming mainly from New England and to a lesser degree from England.

Pérez divides these accounts into eight chapters. The first subset

8. Ernst Breisach, *Historiography* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 3, 404.

includes six of the eight and deals with a structural overview of society as a whole, ranging from a physical description of the city of Havana to institutions that provided health, education, and welfare. These first six sets of accounts also make passing references to the various groups that made up Cuban slave society. Overall, these chapters provide a contextual framework and comparisons of Cuban slave society with other New World slaveocracies.

The remaining two chapters include travelers' observations that focus on a more human dimension of the Cuban slave community. In the seventh chapter, "The Sugar Plantation: Production, Culture, and Economy," Pérez describes the interaction among the various groups within the slave community and with the broader Cuban population. This collection of accounts also provides human testimony on a spectrum of themes that include working and living conditions. Here Pérez uses an approach currently less emphasized in slave studies. He stresses the voices of actors, or in the case of travelers, firsthand observers of slave society in Cuba. This method still represents the most direct and perhaps most revealing means of reconstructing the human side of slaveocracies.

The eighth and last chapter of accounts, presented under the heading "Slaves and Slavery," deals even more directly with individuals caught up in the institution. It includes commentators on the historically most silent set of actors involved in slavery—slaves themselves.

Yet *Slaves, Sugar, and Colonial Society* has some limitations. First, not all travelers left informative and trustworthy testimony. Some supported slavery and praised its operation in Cuba. Invariably, they described a slaveocracy that was efficient for its time. Other observers gazed on Cuban bondage through the eyes of abolitionists and condemned it as oppressive and inhumane. Finally, slaves' voices are those heard least often among the accounts presented.

Indeed, the paucity of slave testimony on slavery remains the most critical gap in scholarly understanding of the institution in Latin America or anywhere else. As students of slavery, we must find new direct and indirect means of incorporating slaves' reactions and insights on their experience into our analyses. One innovative method of achieving this goal employs *historicism*, which tries to understand today's reality by comparing it with yesterday's reality.

The next to the last essay in the Inikori and Engerman volume provides a good example of historicism. Coauthors Thomas Wilson and Clarence Grim attempt to trace the currently high incidence of hypertension among blacks in the Americas to their ancestors' Middle Passage. The authors point out that medical researchers have established a link between salt retention and hypertension. Individuals who retain high levels of salt in their bodies seem more likely to suffer from hypertension. Wilson and Grim speculate that the ability of some slaves to tolerate high

levels of salt in their bodies probably enhanced their chances of surviving the Middle Passage (p. 351). Thus the voyage functioned as a process of natural selection that created an unusually high representation of persons who tended to retain salt among the slave ancestors of today's black population in the New World (p. 341). In support of their conclusion, Wilson and Grim point out that the level of hypertension among Africans today appears no higher than for contemporary whites in Europe and the Americas. This analysis reveals a previously unmentioned negative residual effect of slavery on Africans in the Americas.

Barbara Bush also employs historicism in *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650–1838* in her effort to understand the lives of contemporary Caribbean black women. She first gauges the impact of economic, cultural, gender, and class conditions on female slaves and the broader slave community primarily in the British West Indies but also in the French and Spanish Caribbean islands, Surinam, and Brazil (p. 10). Bush goes on to speculate about how these legacies continue to color the Caribbean today. For example, she charges that planters promoted the image of lascivious female slaves in order to deflect moral condemnation away from themselves for their sexual exploitation of slave women. Bush contends that this stereotype has survived and helps explain negative twentieth-century attitudes about the moral character of Caribbean black women (pp. 13–14). She later points out that many scholars attribute the relatively high incidence of female single-parent households in the modern Caribbean black population to residual influences of slave life. This argument holds that whites disempowered male slaves and thus reduced their role in black families and that this pattern endures today. Bush eventually dismisses this hypothesis but concedes that it is still influencing popular contemporary perceptions of the Caribbean black family (pp. 84–87).

Bush's application of historicism reveals important historical and modern insights. It enhances our understanding of attitudes held by and about slaves by extrapolating backward from contemporary perceptions of blacks and the broader population. Ultimately, she concludes that Caribbean slave women and their descendants suffer more than previously thought from their direct and indirect association with slavery.

Conclusion

Recent slave studies, including those on Latin America, have addressed relatively new questions about the institution and applied old theories (Marxism and capitalism) as well as new ones (historicism and the Annales perspective) to the topic. In doing so, scholars have adapted innovative methodologies such as comparative and structuralist approaches. Their contributions have advanced general understanding of the context, dynamics, and relevance of Latin American and other slave societies by

finding out how they operated and fit into various mixtures of change and continuity in the Western world from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries.

We nevertheless have much left to learn. The most persistent gap in our comprehension of Latin American and other slave societies concerns the perceptions of the component groups and individuals—masters, slaves, and freed persons of all racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds on the institutions. These insights hold great significance for old, current, and future questions about slavery. In all probability, no single method will unlock the “secrets” surrounding slavery. Nonetheless, pursuit of these questions remains as necessary now as when slavery still existed in places like Latin America. No matter how deeply we probe the structural, contextual, and operational characteristics of the institution, we must never lose sight of the fact that the groups and individuals involved in slavery acted less in response to these realities than in response to their own perceptions of them. The perceptions deduced from travelers’ accounts and the actions of individuals all suggest that such indirect evidence, the only kind available to us at this time, can help fill this void in our knowledge of slavery.