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Book Review

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Laird W. Bergad. *Slavery and the Demographic and Economic History of Minas Gerais, Brazil, 1720–1888*. (Cambridge Latin American Studies, number 85.) New York: Cambridge University Press. 1999. Pp. xxix, 298. $54.95.

This is an ambitious volume focusing on the largest of Brazil's eighteenth and nineteenth-century regional slave systems. The author examines the consolidation of the mining-based export economy and the subsequent (or concomitant) expansion of agricultural and ranching activities geared to supplying markets within and beyond the frontiers of the captaincy/province of Minas Gerais. In terms of economic history, Laird W. Bergad provides a competent survey of two decades of revisionist historiography, dispelling the notion that the region slipped into secular stagnation once gold yields began their precipitous decline during the 1750s, with recovery coming through the emergence of a geographically limited coffee sector in the 1850s. In fact, a remarkable economic diversity, including cattle raising, dairy farming, foodstuff production, crafts, textiles, metallurgy, and other activities, avoided the decadence once imputed to Minas. Indeed, diversity fueled population growth well into the twentieth century. Although the survey lacks originality, the book has two important merits: it makes recent findings on a major slave economy available in a well-written English text; and it emphasizes the importance of market forces in determining historical tendencies, thereby suggesting that rigidities in the colonial system were less binding than traditional interpretations allow. 1

The assertion that Minas's nineteenth-century imports of Africans were second only to those of Cuba sparked a raging debate over the nature of regional slave demography. Bergad intends to settle that debate. He fails to do so adequately because his arguments and methodology are seriously flawed. According to the arguments, a virtual halt in slave imports from 1770 to 1810 allowed the slave population to overcome sexual imbalances engendered by the slave trade and embark on the path of natural increase; although imports partially recuperated after 1810, most subsequent growth of the slave population resulted from natural increase. 10,028 inheritance records, which generally provide slave origins and which show a steady decline in the proportion of Africans, form the basis for Bergad's assertion that Minas's slave population trailed only the U.S. South in terms of reproductive capacity. 2

Historically, Minas Gerais has been characterized by regional differences that are not conducive to sweeping generalizations. The author is attentive to such differences when examining economic development, but he ignores them when addressing demography. It is probable that regions least affected by diminished gold returns continued to import slaves. Southern Minas and northern diamond-producing regions were largely unaffected by the contraction besetting central mining districts and their African presence fell only marginally. Moreover, numerous 1831–1832 nominal lists distinguishing between Africans and natives are ignored. The lists' slave population is consistently more African than the 1830–1834 inheritance record sample used by the author: in the diamond district, Africans accounted for fifty-one percent of all slaves in 1831–1832, while Bergad's figures show them as a mere 37.5 percent. Equally ignored were findings that Minas was the destination of some forty-five percent of Africans reexported from Rio de Janeiro between 1818 and 1831. This suggests potential imports of thousands of Africans during the last decades of the transatlantic slave trade. Although natural increase clearly played a part in maintaining or increasing the Minas slave population from 1780 on, the challenge is to determine its relative contribution to the dynamics of slave demography. 3

Bergad's unwillingness to engage in hermeneutics can be irritating. While noting that, until the 1820s, whites seldom accounted for one fifth of the total population, he accepts the 1872 census data showing that participation as 40.8 percent. Such a shift is not impossible, but it is highly improbable. As recent studies show, after 1850 earlier practices of meticulous racial labeling gave way to a blurring of color lines and a "whitening" of statistics. The most glaring example of Bergad's lack of attention to his sources comes from the following 4 quote: "But it is futile even to speculate about the specific dynamics of credit and marketing prevailing in other [non-coffee] sectors or regions in the absence of documentary sources." The 10,028 inheritance records examined are replete with information on debts owed to and by the deceased, information that also reveals much about marketing. These same sources could yield data on the proportion of slave property to total wealth, a proportion that, despite rising slave prices, fell from 1820 on. Why are such issues left untouched, and why are connections between demographic and economic history not established?

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Bergad has undoubtedly made a substantial contribution to our understanding of price fluctuations and of age and gender distributions. In the end, however, the value of this book lies more in the debate it will stimulate than in its conclusions. 5

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