


“THE ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT OF 1879-1888. LESSONS FROM A POPULAR REFORM MOVEMENT”

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While honored with the invitation to write an opinion piece regarding nineteenth-century Abolitionism and its relevance today, I hesitate. I am an American and a historian; as an outsider with professional background in Brazil’s nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I am uncomfortable in suggesting that I can be of use as a political commentator in regard to Brazil today. Yet, in other ways, perhaps both my being foreign and my being someone who has attempted to reconstruct the past may offer a useful perspective on Brazil and the present. Let the reader judge.

Many of us were galvanized into the study of history out of an interest in politics in our own time. Some sought in history an explanation for the realities of the present. Others sought in the past lessons for addressing and changing those realities. My own sense is that we do best by doing both. Nonetheless, our political interests pose a hazard to our historical analyses. In my own professional labors, I have worked hard to recover the past, not as I wanted it to be in terms of my own values, but as its contemporaries understood

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it. It is difficult. I suspect many of my colleagues share with me the sense of how hard it is not to misread the past in terms of our own present and our own politics. However, we still attempt it. While completely dispassionate analysis is impossible, like most colleagues, I still hold that our success at understanding the past is more likely if we attempt it. The past can be reconstructed to justify our present political views, but I think that most of us would agree that doing so obscures the actual realities of the past and, thus, undercuts our successful understanding of the past in regard to either our present reality or the possibility of attempting to change that reality successfully.

I have been working on the Empire of Brazil's political history for many years; the last fourteen, I have focused on the Abolitionist movement in Brazil (1879-1888). It was distinct from any political movement preceding or following it by a unique combination of distinct aspects. It shifted from parliament to the streets as a popular movement, and did so quickly. It came to embrace a range of interconnected radical reforms in the attempt to transform the nation in a way benefitting most Brazilians. It was led by people of varied backgrounds and political attributes. It was successfully sustained over nearly a decade. It had increasing impact outside of Rio, organizing nationally early on. The provincial movements were nationally significant; at least three were critical (those of Ceará, Pernambuco, and São Paulo). The national movement had gradual but clear impact on the nature and direction of the monarchy's parliamentary politics and legislation, finally compelling the elite to accept at least one radical reform – the immediate legal end of all slavery, without indemnification. This was a triumph far removed from the movement's initial goals, which, in 1880, first involved a gradual transition from slave to free labor over ten years, and then, by 1882, emphasized moral suasion to secure the voluntary manumission of slaves, impacting a minority of captives in the towns and cities. The goal of an immediate end to slavery for all captives without indemnification dated only from early 1883.

In Brazil, popular mobilization to carry out the agendas of one elite or middle class fraction or another, particularly in urban cen-

ters, was not new. They were significant in the era immediately before independence, in the independent state's formation, and in partisan disputes over the era 1820-1848. They sometimes touched upon racial issues or issues of popular participation, but they were brief, led and manipulated by elite or middle-class leadership, and their larger, more popular issues were contained, quashed, and then forgotten. The Abolitionist movement was different. It quickly became a movement characterized and dependent upon its mass mobilization and it actually put an end to legal slavery. The other issues the movement's leadership embraced, from land reform through to political reforms, were quickly watered down or put aside – first by the administrations in power, and then by the coup of 1889 and the ensuing confusion over the nature and direction of the state over the early 1890s. Moreover, we all know that Brazilian racism remained and endured. Nonetheless, the reform achieved was significant. Legal slavery was ended – something that might have endured well into the twentieth century if the movement had not formed and acted. Indeed, the parliamentary leader who first championed what became the Abolitionist movement in the imperial Chamber of Deputies, and came to lead the movement there and, often, in the streets, expected the struggle itself might take decades.

It was a movement born and nurtured in the elite reaches of parliament and journalism, but it cannot be understood without addressing the critical role of Afro-Brazilian participation in the movement's leadership and mass following and without the understanding of that participation's nature and impact. Both that nature and impact were critical to the movement's success and both were recognized and encouraged by its leadership, which emphasized justice, progress, and racial identity and solidarity. And both that participation and impact had their final political meaning in their impact on the elite reaches of society – in and out of the state. It was in those reaches that the movement's success at destabilizing slavery was recognized and that the decision to end slavery was made – in order to contain further destabilization of society, economy, and the state.

In present-day Brazil, beset by pandemic, profound political division, and the continued, crippling burden of racism, what lessons for progressive resolution and reform does this history suggest? One must proceed with caution here, of course. For one thing, as most of us do, we must accept that the circumstances of one movement are unique – what worked for one movement at one time and place may not have the context necessary for another movement’s success at another time and place. For another, the reformists of the late 1870s and 1880s emphasized only one in a long list of reforms – they emphasized the one reform which might appeal to most Brazilians and potentially lead to addressing the others. That they picked slavery may well have had to do with their appreciation of its potential for attracting general opposition. After all, by then, over the years after the end of the African slave trade, only the elite itself (and mostly the elite in one or two regions) had a vested interest in slavery – it was no longer a commonplace or, at least, an aspiration, as it had been up to 1850 among free Brazilians of all colors, in both the rural and urban elite, the middle class, and even the free, working masses. It was a barbaric target which most could attack.

There are other aspects of the Abolitionist movement which seem to offer useful guidance to any movement directed at radical reform. First, as just indicated, the movement appealed to, and mobilized, elements across the varied classes and colors dividing Brazil. It was cross-class, cross-color, with a positive vision embracing the whole society, and it emphasized a cause correlated with hopes and ideals the great majority could accept and embrace. Second, the movement’s key leaders and their followers, despite significant differences in class and color, as well as in personal strengths and weaknesses and political perspective, soon learned to work together. While there were at least two distinct wings, the more reformist and the more radical, each with its particular constituency and tactics, they were allied in one movement. While there might have been tactical differences, they worked together to reach agreed-upon goals. Often, their very differences were useful to the movement; state actions indicate that, over time, the state may well have come to turn toward

the more reformist leadership and wing partly out of concern with the more radical. As part and parcel of all of this, each of the principle leaders came to subordinate his particular actions, contacts, and following to their common goals. They reached out to each other, they communicated constantly, and they dominated the larger, umbrella organization. Third, the movement was willing and able to embrace state reformism that stopped short of their ultimate goals but, at least, opened the way towards those goals. As a consequence of this, the state reached out to the movement politically through consultation and negotiation, doubtless to contain the movement but, also, in recognition of at least some of the merit of the cause and to move beyond frustration and antagonism. And, fourth, at the beginning and the end of the movement, when the state did not move forward towards the movement, the movement forced itself on the state through public, popular mobilization that grew dramatically over time through effective appeal to the population in demonstrations that could not be ignored. A key to this was organization along the lines of its various movement constituencies, from slaves and freedmen through religious confraternities, skilled working-class groups, middle-class women, and professional groups. There were phases, and there was an interweave between state and movement behavior, that the leaders in both the state and the movement recognized and within which they worked.

In the end, the movement, while it failed in achieving most of what it envisioned, did give Brazil the Golden Law. Given the fact that it did so faced with a state run by slaveholders and in a country where slavery was still perceived to be critical to the economy, this is an achievement to be reckoned with, and understood. Not only as a glory of the Brazilian struggle forward, but, perhaps, as a suggestive example of how progressive change might be undertaken again.

Select Bibliographic References, in Order of Publication:

For an introduction to works associated with the Abolitionist movement in Brazil up to 2010, see

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